

Heroes and Heroines or Just Like Us?

Young People's Views on Childhood in Children's Books

Susan Elsley

This signed statement confirms that this thesis, *Heroes and Heroines or Just Like Us: Young People's Views on Childhood in Children's Books*, is my own work and that contributions from other sources are duly acknowledged.

Signed

Susan Elsley

18 April 2009

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Abstract

Childhood is socially constructed and holds profound meaning for contemporary society. Although children are increasingly seen as social agents, the dominant view is that children are unable to make substantial contributions to society due to their immaturity and minority status. Childhood theorists have countered this by emphasising the importance of seeking children's views, an approach which underpins this study.

Children's books provide ideological sources for constructing and understanding childhood. They have a cultural role in representing childhood to children and adults and are widely perceived to be a resource for children's education and socialisation. In addition, children's books are written, produced and their use is mediated by adults. This study aims to find out if books provide a space for children in a predominantly adult constructed world by exploring what young people think about the ways in which childhood is represented in children's books.

The research was undertaken with young people aged 10 to 14 years, concentrating on the lower and higher end of the age group, and took place in schools. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used with 158 young people taking part in a questionnaire survey and 43 participating in interviews. The study found that young people were active co-constructors, rather than passive recipients, of representations of childhood in children's books. Young people demonstrated that they were skilled text handlers who acknowledged the influence of other media on their engagement with books although there were marked differences in their reading interests depending on age and gender. Young people were interested in fiction which portrayed assertive and competent depictions of childhood which they could relate to their own experience as well as enjoying reading about young characters with powers and skills which were extraordinary. Young people did not view childhood or the depiction of childhood negatively, accepting it as a state of being rather than one of becoming, hence contributing to their own understandings of childhood.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Childhood, placed at a tangent to adulthood, perceived as special and magical, precious and dangerous at once, has turned into some volatile stuff – hydrogen or mercury, which has to be contained.

(Warner, 1994: 35)

Writing this first chapter towards the end of May 2008, I was reminded why the focus of this study is relevant to an understanding of children, childhood and children's books. The news items were not remarkably different to the usual coverage of stories about children and young people. Several tragic incidents were reported; the funeral of one young man aged 16 years old, killed by another and the death of a seven year old child by starvation and neglect. A parliamentary debate on the time limit for abortions raised issues about when a child's life begins and when it is acceptable to terminate pregnancy (Porter and Prince, 2008). Schools in England were reported as taking action on students they suspected of joining gangs (Curtis, 2008). In Scotland, a contentious debate on the age when young people are able to participate in consenting sexual activity without prosecution was reported (Gordon, 2008). Children were again at the forefront of rigorous examinations about contemporary childhood and their relationship to the world we inhabit.

Other news items explored children's literacy and children's books. Ofsted, the education inspectorate in England, commented that it was unacceptable that a fifth of children who moved from primary to secondary school were not fully literate or numerate (Judd, 2008). Michael Rosen, the Children's Laureate¹ and a children's poet, was in the news on two occasions. Talking about the suitability of the Harry Potter books by J.K Rowling (1998)² for younger children, he suggested that authors were in loco parentis in children's books (Rosen, 2008c). He appeared again on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme with fellow children's writer Judith Kerr to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the publication of her children's illustrated book, *When the Tiger Came to*

Tea (Kerr, 2002). In *The Guardian* newspaper, Bidisha (2008), a woman author, discussed an (adult) backlash against J. K. Rowling and the Harry Potter books and why the achievements of female fantasy writers, particularly those for children, are underplayed. A new comic, *The DFC*³, was launched with the well known children's writer, Philip Pullman, as a contributor. Reading, books and children's authors were grist to the media mill on the subject of children and young people.

These are only a very small sample of the many stories concerning both childhood and children's books which are regularly covered across the media. When I began this research, I diligently gathered newspaper cuttings on these areas to contribute to the study. I abandoned this after a brief time, overwhelmed by the volume of items. This high level of coverage reflects the significant interest of the media, the public, politicians and professionals in children and the experience of childhood. It also reflects a surprisingly totemic commitment to exploring children's reading (often through the measurement of educational achievement in literacy) and to the books that children read. What this constant stream of news stories also demonstrates, however, is an absence of children's perspectives on these areas. Children's views were unheard on the news items described above. This is commonplace. Children are the presence felt but not seen or heard in the midst of these dialogues, conversations and arguments. Children's voices are excluded from the adult only spaces of media communication except when they are occasional token contributors (Morrow, 2007).

This study has emerged out of the convergence of the three areas mentioned above, namely children, childhood and children's books. They are related, of course, by their connections to the early part of the life course: children read children's books which, in turn, contain representations of childhood. Childhood, as shall be explored throughout this study, is a slippery and uncertain social construct which also holds profound meaning, particularly for adults (James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002). Children's books contribute to constructions of childhood. These texts represent understandings of children and childhood (Hunt, 2005). Written by adults for a child

readership, children's books have many purposes. Children and young people are the readers of these books and are Hendrick's (2003) 'inhabitants' of the contemporary experience of childhood. Adult led debates about both childhood and children's books, however, often exclude children. On the other hand, recent attention to the concept of children's social agency by childhood theorists and professionals has emphasised the importance of seeking young people's perspectives on different parts of their life experiences (see James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup et al, 1994). This approach underpins this study theoretically and methodologically. By researching directly the views of children, this thesis aims to provide an insight into children and young people's own understandings of childhood in the books they read.

The research takes forward my own interest in children's spaces: how children create, find and take possession of their own space in a predominantly adult constructed world. Discussing social space, Jenks suggests that everyone can experience spatial restrictions, but that 'the child's experience of such parameters is often paradoxical, often unprincipled and certainly erratic' (2005: 74). Children are competing for their own territory in an adult regulated environment. Focusing in particular on children's cultural space, I explore the relationship between children and young people and the representation of childhood in children's fiction. I consider the role and importance that children's books have in children and young people's lives and explore whether books do in fact provide what Moss and Petrie call a 'social, cultural, and discursive' space for children (2002:106). I reflect on how far young people are passive recipients of the representations that adults provide in books or whether young people actively work with texts to contribute to shaping themselves. I develop my arguments by considering how constructs of childhood, a view of children as human becomings and, at the other end of the continuum, as social actors, influences young people's engagement with books. In order to do this, I asked young people about their views on the representations of childhood they encounter in books.

This first chapter introduces the rationale for undertaking the research, why the research is relevant to increasing knowledge about the experience of childhood and what theoretical approaches underpin the study. It highlights four areas which were important to establishing the objectives for the study. Firstly, this chapter considers what importance is attached to childhood. Secondly, it considers the relevance of children's books to the experience of childhood. Thirdly, it considers why representations of childhood are relevant to developing an understanding of this part of the life course. Finally, I discuss my own personal interest in undertaking a study on children, childhood and children's books. The chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the thesis and the terms and definitions that are used throughout.

Contemporary childhood

The starting place for this study is childhood. In the twenty first century a great deal of energy and commitment is focused on childhood. It has a special place in society. This early part of the life experience is often revered by adults as well as being the focus of hopes and aspirations for the future (Jenkins, 1998). At other times, childhood is regarded as contentious with children regarded as unsettling and troublesome (Buckingham, 2000; Hendrick, 2003; Wyness, 2000). How childhood is being experienced by children can be viewed as a benchmark for the humanity or inhumanity of our individual and collective actions. Childhood is therefore invested with powerful emotions and beliefs as well as being the recipient of substantial economic and social resources to ensure that childhood 'works' for children and adults (Hendrick, 2003). Much of this energy is focused on supporting the nurturing and caring which passes from one generation to the next through families (Wyness, 2000). Childhood is also regarded as a shared public and political endeavour with different responsibilities given to professionals in education, health and social care (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994; Wyness, 2000). It gives rise to a substantial market which provides commodities for children, including books, the focus of this study. This part of human life, as Rose suggests, is 'the most intensely governed sector of personal existence' (1989: 121). It

therefore appears to be very important that we understand children's lives and, as a consequence, childhood.

As a result of the powerful investment in childhood, children and young people's lives are scrutinised by many different adults including parents, professionals, politicians, the media and academics. Twenty first century children are perceived to have a number of different characteristics which contribute to a view of childhood as a difficult, risky and unstable period in the life course (James and James, 2008; Wyness, 2000). In this context, children are seen by adults to be both troubled and troubling (Buckingham, 2000; James et al, 1998). Troubled children are worried about bullying, peer group pressure and achieving at school. They do not get enough exercise, are overweight and spend too much time on computers or watching television. They do not play outside because of possible risks and dangers. They are vulnerable to abuse, neglect and violence from those who are close to them as well as strangers. Troubling children on the other hand cause disturbances and unsettle communities. They gather in groups in public places and are threatening and abusive. They commit offences and engage in acts of violence. They are anarchic and non compliant, squandering their time and energies. They participate poorly in school and are undisciplined. They are engaged in anti social activities including drug and alcohol misuse and inappropriate sexual activity. Today's children are 'growing up too soon'.

This is a simplistic and arbitrary summary of some commonly stated perceptions of the experience of modern day childhood. They reveal concerns that are regularly reflected in the media, by politicians, parents, child care professionals, researchers and by children themselves (see Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005; Children's Society, 2006; Mayall, 2006; Palmer, 2006; UK Children's Commissioners, 2008; UNICEF, 2007). Adults are concerned because these negative experiences are counter to a view of what a 'good' childhood should be. This more positive childhood should be a time of growth, learning and development which, in turn, leads to a successful transition to adulthood. It allows for children's inexperience to develop into experience, nurtured by positive relationships

and the growth of individual talents. From this emerges the young adult citizen who is equipped to contribute to the social, political and economic well being of society (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994). Alongside this, childhood is still considered as a unique part of the life course which retains particularly intense memories and experiences for adults. Many, even those whose experiences of childhood were not positive, hope for childhoods for their children which allow for the presence of discovery, freedom and joy. As Stephens suggests:

Modern children are supposed to be segregated from the harsh realities of the adult world and to inhabit a safe, protected world of play, fantasy, and innocence.

(Stephens, 1995:14)

These diverse views of childhood are, however, not new. Childhood and children's lives have been closely examined by adults in different ways and settings over the last centuries (see Ariès, 1962; deMause, 1976; Cunningham, 1995; Hendrick, 2003; Heywood, 2001). Childhood has long been seen to be a problematic part of the life course. The commitment of the Victorian philanthropists and child welfare reformers to improving the lives of children resulted from a concern about the numbers of children living in destitution on the streets and in slums as well as a perception that childhood was being debased by this experience (Hendrick, 1997). Moving forward to the early twenty first century, a number of recent interpretations of childhood have brought debates to the forefront of the public gaze. The publication of a UNICEF (2007) report on the well being of children across the richer nations reported that children in the UK were at the bottom of a table of 21 countries which measured indicators of well being. Children were reported as being unhappy, unhealthy and engaging in risky behaviour. This report led to wide coverage in the media⁴ on why children were in this position and why childhood in the UK was, according to these findings, such an impoverished experience. In the same year, a leading children's organisation, the Children's Society, instigated *The Good Childhood Inquiry* (Children's Society, 2006) with the aim of collecting evidence from children and adults to contribute to a twenty first century vision of childhood.

There is an extensive literature exploring contemporary concerns about childhood, targeted at a wide range of audiences and describing the current position of childhood variously as contested and in crisis (see, for example, Brooks, 2006; Gill, 2007; Madge and Barker, 2007; Margo and Dixon, 2006). One publication, *Toxic Childhood* (Palmer, 2006), describes modern childhood as being undermined by the exposure to negative influences which, Palmer suggests, results in children's poor behaviour and a widespread experience of emotional problems. As a result of the impetus given by Palmer's work, professionals and academics with an interest in children wrote an open letter to a newspaper (*The Daily Telegraph*, 2006) expressing their concern about the state of modern childhood. This public communication focused on the need for meeting the developmental needs of children with 'real food', 'real play' and interaction with adults who are important to their well being. Signatories to this letter included prominent children's writers, Anne Fine, Michael Morpurgo, Philip Pullman and Jacqueline Wilson, reflecting their interest in debates on childhood.

This is not the only contribution that children's authors have made to debates about childhood; the call on children's writers as commentators suggests that they are regarded as having particular expertise as interpreters of childhood. They regularly speak out on literacy, children's fiction and educational policies. Five children's authors, for example, published their comments on the English National Literacy Strategy and their concern about the harmful impact on children's reading and writing (Powling et al, 2003). Over 1300 authors, illustrators and others with a professional interest in children's books signed an internet petition in protest at publishers' proposals to bring in age banding of children's books, an initiative which they felt discouraged young people's reading (No to Age Banding, 2008). Authors comment on the experience of childhood as well as children's books. Jacqueline Wilson commented in the media that society is stopping children being children (Rajan and McSmith, 2008). She goes on to state that children are growing up too quickly as a result of having greater access to a consumer culture. They are being 'robbed' of the innocence of childhood. Children's books and their

authors are not removed from debates about the experience of childhood. It is central to their interests.

These different examples are symptomatic of an ongoing undercurrent of societal concern about the 'state' of childhood (Jenks, 2005; Wyness, 2000). Public debates arise when a crisis or problem provides evidence of the poor outcomes, maltreatment or tragic incidents affecting a child or children. Attention may focus on acts of individual adult violence towards children (Mayall, 2006). Morrow (2007) suggests that there is little attention paid to the 'collectivity' of children and the structural issues that affect them. Those interested in understandings of childhood question these public presentations of childhood, seeing them as extreme and profiling children negatively (Buckingham, 2000). Treacher points out that children and childhood attract 'strong opinions based on little knowledge' (2000: 133). There is less emphasis in the public arena on a more dispassionate consideration, away from the news headlines, about the quality and nature of modern childhood. This makes it difficult to assess common trends, their influences and what children themselves actually think about their lives. Evidence about the actual experience of childhood is either incomplete or not widely accessible. Bradshaw and Mayhew (2005) point out that information on children's well being is not comprehensive. As Sutton-Smith suggests there are 'many rhetorics of childhood' (1995:4). Children are shoehorned into fitting particular views of childhood, regardless of the diversity and complexity of their experience. There is, Jenks suggests, 'a compulsive need to refer to childhood as a unitary phenomenon' (2004: 5) as if there is only one kind of childhood.

Increasingly, greater care is given to definitions of childhood by those with an interest in this area. As a result, contradictory and often emotive interpretations of childhood have been examined and challenged. Rather than drawing conclusions at a distance and attributing them to a notional child, the recent work of childhood theorists and researchers has aimed to better understand childhood holistically and across disciplines. This has been given an impetus by the developing sociology of childhood which

emphasises both the diversity of childhood experience and the capacity of children to be social actors in their own right (Archard, 1993; Corsaro, 2005; James and Prout, 1997; James et al, 1998; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup, 2005; Qvortrup et al, 1994). This theoretical approach prioritises children and young people's voices and asserts the right of children to participate in society. Finding out what children think, perceive and experience about the world around them is an underpinning expectation of this perspective, with the overt intention of increasing understandings of childhood. This view of children as social actors, rather than what Qvortrup (1994) calls 'human becomings' (children who do not have the full status that is associated with being an adult), provides the starting point for this thesis.

The focus on children's social agency has been encouraged by other new approaches to childhood. In policy terms, it has included the greater acceptance of children's human rights following the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) in the UK in 1991 and an increasing focus on the participation of young people in decisions that impact on their lives (James et al, 1998; Kirby et al, 2003; Sinclair, 2004; Stafford et al, 2003; Tisdall and Davis, 2004). In addition, the commitment of politicians and policy makers to improving the experiences and outcomes of children's lives has provided an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of interventions made by the state and other organisations to improve children's well being (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005). However, James and James (2008) and Hendrick (2003) suggest that views about childhood reflect contradictory positions. An increasingly liberal understanding of childhood has become more prevalent but, at the same time, government has enforced regressive measures through existing and new laws which 'resist changes that children might seek in fashioning their own childhoods' (James and James, 2008:106).

In addition to the institutional attention that has been given to children's agency, children and young people have come to be seen as consumers in their own right with the development and wide availability of products such as toys, music, clothes,

magazines and books (Cunningham, 2006; Hengst, 2005; Osgerby, 2004). The late 1990s saw a substantial expansion in the increasing availability of computers, game machines, television and other media for children (Drotner, 2005). Children and young people are seen to be ‘naturally’ adept at using computers and other electronic resources (Valentine and Holloway, 2001). As the research findings of this study (see Chapter 4) and others reveal, young people themselves have significantly greater access to electronic media in its different forms (Drotner, 2005; Livingstone and Bober, 2005; Osgerby, 2004).

This particular manifestation of agency, young people as media consumers, has proved to be a contested area, leading to debates about whether children’s consumption should be better mediated by adults (Jones, 2002; Kinder, 1999; Kline, 2005; Drotner and Livingstone, 2008). This has led to a number of interventions including a UK government commissioned inquiry, *The Byron Review* (Byron, 2008), which explored whether the internet and computer games were harmful to children. It is one example of the uncertainty expressed about children and young people’s involvement in digital technologies and other media. The contradictory influences attributed to children’s culture has resulted in opposing constructs of childhood being used as ways of understanding and responding to young people’s engagement with these products. Children are subject to potential economic exploitation as consumers but they are also ‘agents in the construction of their own culture’ (Marsh and Millard, 2000: 21). Jenkins (1998) suggests that there is a tension between those who see children as victims and those who see children as active agents who are able to engage with the process of change. Hutchby and Moran-Ellis (2001) state that the emphasis should not be on the impact of technologies such as the internet and computer games on childhood but rather on how children relate to these media. Drotner and Livingstone argue that public panic about young people’s engagement with media is ultimately about the ‘cultural values that society should promulgate to its children’ (2008: 3). Different constructs of childhood impact on children’s position as consumers and users of culture and commodities.

Children's books and childhood

Children's books contribute to constructions of childhood, both as a cultural form representing childhood and in terms of their purposes for children. This relationship between childhood and children's books is an omnipresent theme in the critical study of children's books (Hollindale, 1988; Hunt, 2005; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1998; Natov, 2003; Watson, 1992b; Zipes, 2001). Although these texts all focus on the importance of childhood, the authors do not (and they do not suggest that they do) generally explore children's perspectives in relation to books. Instead they emphasise adults' views on books for children which are written by other adults. The contradictions inherent in this adult to adult communication about the subject of childhood is returned to throughout this thesis, and is a reflection of a constant dilemma at the heart of examining what Mayall (2002) calls the 'social phenomenon' of children's lives. Adults shape and are present in all aspects of children's lives, and often do so without reference to children and young people's perspectives. This adult dialogue, from which children are absent, is a frequent occurrence, as has been reflected earlier in this chapter, and applies equally to children's books and culture (Hollindale, 1988).

The particular relationship of adult writers and producers to child readers emphasises the challenge at the heart of children's books (Hunt, 2005; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994; Rose, 1993; Rudd, 2005; Zipes, 2001). Are authors of children's books able to represent childhood effectively even though they are removed by age and generation from the experience of childhood? The 'otherness' of the child readership to the producers of books (the authors, publishers and marketers) implies a power relationship that is more muted in books for adults by adults. Children's books, however, are generally viewed as containing both benign and subversive representations of children (Lurie, 1990; Wannamaker, 2008). Written by authors who are perceived to be on the 'side of children' and often promoting assertive and capable depictions of young people through characters such as Harry Potter, Alex Rider⁵ or Lyra⁶, children's books can be seen as

falling easily into close commune with those associated with asserting the agency of children.

In the way that views on modern childhood are often given a high profile, children's books too have a special, sometimes iconic, place as a cultural product for children. They attract wide attention and interest based on the different identities and purposes that books have for adults and children. Firstly, books for children have a long history (Hunt, 2005). In comparison with newer media for children and young people, particularly those technologies which have emerged over the last 15 years, books have a longevity which has enabled texts to embed themselves in our collective memory and societal history. Kline suggests that two centuries of children's literature classics have 'become definitional to our understanding of children's experience and culture in the modern era' (1993: 78). In biographical accounts of childhood, books have a particular importance as memories such as in Spufford's (2002) account of reading as a child. Hunt (2005) points out that many of those adults who now have power read books as children and the ideologies within these books will potentially have had an influence on them. Favourite children's books are also shared inter-generationally (Eccleshare, 2002). The profile of these books remains high even when they are not read by most young people. Many have been adapted for other media and produced as toys. Books such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S Lewis (2001 [1950]), *Swallows and Amazons* by Arthur Ransome (2001 [1930]) and *The Railway Children* by Edith Nesbit (1994 [1906]) have a resonance in spite of the period, at least half a century, since the most recent was first published. In this study, for example, some young people talked with assurance about books that they had not read such as the Harry Potter series or *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1968 [1954/1955]) because they had met these texts elsewhere. Young people felt, however, that they knew the books and their stories.

Children's books are also seen as fundamentally important for their multiple roles. As will be explored in Chapter 2 and throughout this thesis, the purposefulness that is attached by adults to children's books gives them an elevated status because they are

seen to be ‘good for children’ (Hunt, 2005; Meek, 1995). Since they were first published, children’s books have been subject to a number of stringent demands by adults. Their importance in educating children in literacy skills, in conveying information and in passing on moral standards and beliefs, has assured children’s books of a particular status within the cultural products available to children. The value of books as an educational tool continues to be encouraged by educationalists and politicians with the combination of literacy and literature regarded as important contributors to educational achievement. National policy discussions about literacy in schools emphasise the importance of learning to read using high quality literature as well as using, for example, skills in phonics (Rose, 2006). Additionally, books are seen to have a value in providing a fictional exploration of the experience of childhood and the preparation for the transition to adulthood. Their moral, educational and social value therefore remains consistently high and widespread. It is also seen to have higher value than other cultural products for children, particularly those described as popular culture. Drotner (2005) suggests that print culture is dominant in European culture while visual culture emanating out of Hollywood is seen at the bottom of the cultural ladder. Books then have an inbuilt advantage over other forms of culture for children, imbibed as they are with these virtuous values.

Children’s books are also a widely available commodity for children. In 2006, nearly 300 million pounds worth of children’s books were sold (Office for National Statistics, 2008a). Over the last few years, in addition to their historical profile and their significant roles, children’s books have received wide public recognition (Arts Council England, 2003). Popular high selling UK children’s authors such as J. K. Rowling, Jacqueline Wilson, Anthony Horowitz and Phillip Pullman have attracted significant interest by both children and adults. Such has been the marketing and publicity attached to these and other writers through book awards, the high profile championing role given to the Children’s Laureate and contact with young people through the media, school visits and book festivals, that children’s authors have become well known and highly visible.

Some authors such as J.K. Rowling or Jacqueline Wilson have an attendant celebrity status. Young people's awareness of authors was reflected in the study.

The increased visibility accorded to children's books has an importance in wider cultural terms. Children's books do not exist in isolation but alongside other manifestations of children's culture (Kinder, 1999). The relationship between children's books and other media has become more explicit with greater links between the written text, television, film, digital technologies and toys. The new hybrid cultural products reflect an important consumer market in economic terms (Kenway and Bullen, 2008) as well as giving greater prominence to individual books. Books are an important part of culture for children and young people, representing childhood in a 'for children' format but conceived and mediated by adults. The study explores this relationship.

The influence of constructs of childhood, often presented in opposition to each other, pervades children's culture including children's books. Adopting a particular construct as a way of viewing childhood influences how young people's engagement with texts is understood. Viewing young people solely as human becomings, as citizens-in-waiting, suggests that young readers are more likely to be in tune with the constructs that adults pass onto them through cultural forms. Their status as learners suggests a more passive positioning of their childhood status. Accepting young people's capacity to be social agents changes this perspective, intimating that young people actively seek out meaning because they have the competence to do so. They become their own constructors, rather than passive consumers, of texts. This also implies that there might be differences between adults' and young people's viewpoints. Young people might not accept adults' construction of themselves as readers or within texts. The study explores which, if either, of the two constructs is more dominant in young people's engagement with books.

Representing childhood in children's culture

Young people's views on representations of childhood in books are at the core of this research. So why are representations of childhood important? As highlighted previously,

perceptions of modern childhood generate a mixture of different responses. As childhood is a social construct without a firm and fixed status, it is subject to many different interpretations in institutions, governance, culture, media and through everyday interactions. These representations are manifested in different narratives:

Representations of children, visual as well as textual, permeate our daily lives, providing accounts which pass in and out of young and old alike

(Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992: 20)

Some of these representations are targeted at children and some at adults but all have an important place in society, providing ideological sources for understanding childhood. They play a wider role than providing information or entertainment. Instead these 'fictionalised children and childhoods have been used as emblematics for constructing child knowledge' (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992: 20). So the fictional child in the Walt Disney film and the child in the advertisement, as well as the child in the book are not neutral aesthetic representations of a child; they tap into more fundamental understandings of what it means to be young.

Representations of childhood also have a role in constructing adult knowledge. Steedman, in a study of the portrayal of the female child character of Mignon from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, suggests that the 'idea of a child' provided 'the means for thinking about and creating a self' (1995: 20). This still has a contemporary resonance. Understanding childhood is not necessarily about children; it is also about making sense of the human experience during the life course. But representations also have an important role for adults in providing social and educational resources for children's development. Jenkins (1998) suggests that adults have an interest in 'fixing' children's identities. Using children's culture is one way of promoting the development of young people in ways that are within the control of adults.

These representations are omnipresent: in books for children and those for adults, in films and television programmes, in computer games and internet social networking sites, in comics and magazines, in photographs and pictures and in advertising and news

coverage. Children are growing up ‘in a world saturated in images and representations’ (Coles and Hall, 2001: 113). These representations are in turn derived from different views of childhood. To understand and to critique these perspectives offers an opportunity to extend individual and collective understandings of what we think are appropriate representations of the experience of childhood. Otherwise representation becomes seen as being truth (Stephens, 1992). These representations become accepted as fact without an analysis of whether they are, in some ways, accurate. Writing about the representation of children in visual art, Higgonet (1998) believes that we are going through a period when cultural understanding of childhood is changing significantly. In this time of flux, according to Higgonet, visual representations consolidate and affirm contemporary understandings of childhood. Images which are viewed as troubling give rise to fears that societal behaviour will be influenced by them (Higgonet, 1998). Although the image of childhood is seen to be changing, it is ‘virtually always understood as a distortion or even a perversion of a true, natural childhood’ (Higgonet, 1998:193). This sense of a ‘true’ or ‘natural’ childhood is pervasive (James and Prout, 1997). Images or textual representations which show children engaged in behaviour that is seen to be in opposition to this notion of ‘true’ childhood are found to be unpalatable (Higgonet, 1998). Other writers and researchers also reinforce the importance of cultural representations of childhood in both confirming certain perspectives of childhood as well as providing the impetus for new ones. Buckingham, who writes on young people’s engagement with television and other forms of media, states that:

the production of texts for children – both in the modern electronic media, and in more traditional forms of children’s literature – can also be seen to sustain particular ideologies of childhood.

(Buckingham, 2000:12)

Representations or images of childhood are not restricted to localised encounters. International access to markets, along with technology, has provided a fast highway for different representations of children to be available across the world (de Block and Buckingham 2007; Gillis, 2002). Representations of childhood are therefore pervasive in

multiple forms and environments (Gillis, 2002). These representations of children are created, produced and mediated by adults, emphasising adult power. Jenkins (1998) states that children do not participate in or contribute to their own culture although children and young people are increasingly creating their own forms on the internet and in digital technologies. As a result, culture which is meant for children is influenced by adults' expectations.

Representations of childhood play a powerful role in contributing to constructs of childhood. In a formal cultural form such as children's books, these representations influence our understandings of childhood. If they are solely derived from adult constructs, they are limited by the potential dissonance between the perspectives of adults and those of children. On the other hand, children and young people may play a part in constructing these representations. This is explored in the study.

Bringing self to the study

The subject of this thesis grew out of my academic interest in childhood and how children's lives are understood and experienced by young people themselves. Beyond the different rationales for the study was a different and more personal objective which provided another impetus for developing this research. The study provided me with a serendipitous opportunity to draw on my longstanding interest in children's books in a research project. By utilising this personal interest as a resource in developing academic research, a number of different aspects of my own engagement became important to examine. It brought a particular perspective to the research which I will briefly explore here.

Adults who explore their own or their children's experience of childhood through one medium or another are not unusual or unique. Writers and artists, for example, heavily make use of their childhood experiences to create their own work. Researchers and academics too draw on their own experience to orientate and site their studies. Jenkins et al (2002), in the introduction to a collection of writings on cultural studies, discuss the need to write about their own 'multiple (and often contradictory) involvements,

participations, engagements and identifications with popular culture – without denying, rationalizing, and distorting them’ (Jenkins et al, 2002: 7). They describe those who are effective cultural critics as being able to speak as ‘insiders’ as well as ‘outsiders’ (Jenkins et al, 2002: 7). Academic distance, they suggest, does not always do justice, to the relationship between scholarly interests and popular culture. While not talking about childhood, their ‘up close and personal’ (Jenkins et al, 2002:9) approach applies to other academics who have integrated personal aspects of their lives or interests into their writings. Researchers, who have explored aspects of childhood and culture, such as Henry Jenkins (1998), Virginia Lowe (2007), Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (2002), Valerie Walkerdine (1997) and Shelby Anne Wolf and Shirley Brice Heath (1992), have acknowledged the closeness of the research subject to their lives, drawing on personal experience, either their own childhoods or that of their children, to situate their work. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) list a range of writers on children and culture who have utilised their own experience in this way, arguing that the role of the researcher cannot be viewed as a neutral experience:

The fact that children’s culture is so inflected by issues of ephemerality, memory work and nostalgia means that it is all the more significant that we understand the position of the researcher – and our own childhood experiences.

(Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002: 40)

As a reader of children’s books I believed that I could bring useful understanding and knowledge to the study. At the same time, I was aware that my assumptions about children and young people’s engagement with children’s books could frame the research in a more limiting way. I wanted to ensure, like Jenkins et al (2002), that I could take my personal interest into an area of study but still apply academic principles to the work.

Exploring children’s books through research meant that my different experiences as a reader, as a child and as an adult influenced how I approached the study. Firstly, there was my own childhood relationship to books which I thought about a great deal at the beginning of the research. It became less relevant, however, as the research progressed, as young people’s own reading experiences revealed the difference between reading now

and my own recollections of reading as a child. Summarising my reading history briefly, I read avidly through childhood, beginning with Grimm's fairy tales and moving onto a wide selection of adventure and fantasy stories. I was particularly addicted to the *Swallows and Amazons* series by Arthur Ransome (2001 [1930])⁷. I read magazines and comics whenever I could but these were frowned on by adults as being of slightly dubious value and were difficult to come by. I did not like Enid Blyton (1942) whose books I found dull. I loved books such as *The Railway Children* by the Edwardian Edith Nesbit (1994 [1906]) and was particularly taken by the stories of the Melendy family written by the American writer Elizabeth Enright (1967 [1942]). I liked Malcolm Saville (1995 [1947]) and his stories of young detectives, the Lone Pine Club. I read *Little Women* (Alcott, 1988 [1868/1869]) and *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 2006 [1908]). I sometimes read the Jennings books by Anthony Buckeridge (2003 [1952]) and I read all of the Narnia series by C.S Lewis (2001 [1950]). When I moved on from children's books, I read science fiction, thrillers and nineteenth century novels. I read the traditional crossover fiction for young readers such as *Jane Eyre* (Bronte, 2006 [1847]) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 2004 [1960]). I was a committed reader all the way through childhood into young adulthood.

Those were the books I read but there was something else more intangible about my reading, linked to the experience of childhood and the place of reading in it. Spufford (2002), in his vibrant account of his own childhood experiences of reading, reflects that 'the books that you read as a child brought you sights you hadn't seen yourself, scents you hadn't smelled, sounds you hadn't heard' (2002:10). This powerful description resonates with aspects of my own memories of reading where books extended the spaces of my childhood; this recollection, I suspect, influences my ongoing interest in this area in some way. Reading, according to my memory of the childhood experience, was more important than the simple act of engaging with a book. It provided adventure and discovery which was unmediated by the adults around me. It was a personal and intimate place of exploration. The intensity of the reading experience, which Spufford describes and I remember, is also mentioned by Fry (1985) in his research on younger readers. He

talks of one reader for whom the importance of ‘reading fiction has peopled her mind and extended her life, that without her experience of stories she would not be the person she is’(1985:95). These different descriptions are not dissimilar to the daydreaming that Philo (2003) associates with memory and imagination in childhood, drawing on the work of Bachelard (1971) on childhood reverie. This experience, Philo suggests, is central to the experience of childhood. He extends his argument to how adult researchers position themselves in relation to young people. Adult researchers could create better opportunities for exchange between adults and children by ‘trying to re-envisage ourselves once again as children daydreaming about families and witches, friends and dinosaurs, local streets and distant spacecraft’ (Philo, 2003:19). The importance of the experience of childhood daydreaming is described by Jane in this study. Talking about her memories of reading and their connections with places, the quote does not quite capture the wistful tone of Jane’s observation as it was recorded:

Some books just make you feel happy and describe things in ways that make you feel really nice. And I don’t know, things happen that remind me of things that I used to do...like being on a beach. I just remember a day when I was on the beach.

(Jane aged 12 years)

The nature of adults’ reflections on the books they read (Brownstein, 1984), and Fry’s (1985) and this study’s research on readers, suggest that childhood and stories are powerful companions in memory and reminiscence (Kline, 1993). My memories associated with reading are entangled with those of a childhood beyond books. However, this raises other kinds of questions about adults and their relationship to childhood. Those who have written on childhood suggest that as adults we carry powerful memories but are no longer in contact with the direct experience of childhood (Philo, 2003; Jones; 2001). As Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) say:

One of the deep paradoxes of finding out about childhood lies in our having been children (and therefore having ‘known’ childhood at first-hand), and yet having no direct – only represented – access to that experience. Stories are all that we can ever have...

(Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992:19)

Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers warn of the assumption of taking memories and drawing on them too readily in analyses of contemporary childhood. I agree. The descriptions of my childhood reading history reveal some difficulties in drawing parallels with those of readers today. I recently re-read a book *The Secret of Grey Walls* by a favourite childhood writer, Malcolm Saville (1995) which was first published in 1947. The novel, part of a series, unselfconsciously describes post Second World War class relationships which now appear dated and obstructed my reading of the text. Many of the perspectives of childhood and society enshrined in books associated with previous generations are difficult to accept in the twenty first century although these books, in the main, are viewed as twentieth century children's 'classics'. As this study found, few of these books are read by young people today who prefer contemporary tellings of childhood. These older books are overwhelmingly sited in white middle class environments and reflect different and more constricted world views. They are set in small geographical spaces and, in spite of a depiction of free ranging fictional childhoods, assert children's autonomy and agency in quite different ways to those of fiction today. Many are still examples of fine storytelling for young people but are, perhaps, as this study suggests in later chapters, a minority interest among children. Avery, a children's author, sees textual longevity as 'slender' beyond one generation and 'beyond the next, minimal' (1983:225). As Fry says:

Older readers are often pleased by novels that recapture their sense of how life was; but for younger readers, their lives still very much before them, novels are often valuable for their insights into present and future experience, how it is and might be.

(Fry, 1985: 98)

I also brought a perspective as an adult reader of children's books. This, rather than the one based on childhood experiences, provided a more useful resource for the study. My longstanding adult interest has predominantly focused on texts for older child readers or young adults. This is similar to many other adult readers of children's books. Books for

younger children tend to be read by adults to children rather than for themselves. The fiction of Malorie Blackman, Tim Bowler, Theresa Breslin, Philip Pullman and Diane Wynne Jones are some recent favourites. The books I now read are generally, but not always, serious. They are often fantastical, sometimes dystopian, and sometimes straightforward contemporary storytelling centred on young people. I have read less (but many more since this study started) of the anarchic humorous books that are very popular with children and young people such as the Captain Underpants books by Dav Pilkey (2000), the Jiggy McCue detective series by Michael Lawrence (1999) and Lemony Snicket's (2001) *A Series of Unfortunate Events*.

My current adult reading experience meant that I was aware of who were the current best selling children's authors and books that were popular. I knew about the different styles and genres and the types of stories that were most commonplace. I could talk about the books which meant that I was (perhaps) less of a distant researcher (this is discussed further in Chapter 3 on the methodology used in the study). There was the possibility of a different kind of dialogue with the young people who took part in the research, taking into account the usual caveats about the power imbalance between the role of researcher and participant (Christensen and James, 2000b; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002).

This personal interest in children's books and their relationship to childhood meant that I might bring a number of embedded beliefs and attitudes to the study. The very act of undertaking this research suggests that I attach a particular value to reading and children's books as a childhood experience. My own reading identities validate an assumption held by many adults that books are important and childhood reading is both a pleasure and an asset. These are personal perspectives, entangled with the recollections of my own childhood as well as, perhaps, my assumptions about other childhoods. I have had to be attentive to how these views could influence the research. Adults assume that they know about childhood because they were once young. They are also arbiters of views about childhood and as a result, are the producers of constructs of childhood.

There are inherent difficulties in this adult dominance. Having experienced childhood does not mean that adults have adequate insights into all its aspects. As Philo (2003) and Jones (2001) point out, adulthood, the layering over of knowledge and experience takes us away from childhood. My experiences as a child, a child reader, an adult and an adult reader are therefore potentially a hindrance to this study as well as being a helpful resource.

Outline of the thesis

There are a number of different ways in which to research childhood and its representation in children's books. The first is to analyse texts for children, draw on studies of children's literature and childhood and from these arrive at a set of conclusions. This approach would give prominence to adult perspectives and would therefore be subject to the misinterpretations that can be made by adults. This research is not a literary endeavour but one which focuses on children and young people's perspectives. The intention was to secure the active engagement of children and to prioritise their perspectives. It was not a study of children's books that was being undertaken but one about children's understandings of, and engagements with, the fictional texts they read. Crossing as it does a number of academic boundaries, the study of children's books finds itself with a toehold amongst those with a literary and culture focus, educationalists and sociologists. Studies of children's books, by virtue of the unique difference between the status and position of the writer and the child reader, continually revisit the relationship of the text to the child and to the place of childhood in society (Chambers, 1995; Hunt, 1991; Hollindale, 1988; Lesnik-Oberstein, 1994; Zipes, 2001). However, many of these studies are led by an interest in the content and theoretical positioning of the text rather than readers' views. This study aims to draw its analysis from research with young people, steering the focus away from the centrality of the text and towards a social science perspective.

The aim of the thesis was to consider what young people thought about the ways in which children's books represent childhood. As this was potentially a large and

ambitious area of research, I decided to focus on a number of specific areas in order to narrow the scope of the research. Firstly, I wanted to know more about young people's relationships with books, their reading interests and habits, in order to find out whether different constructs of childhood are embedded in young people's reading. Secondly, I wanted to find out if young people thought that children's books were credible representations of individual and collective experiences of childhood. I therefore asked young people about their reflections on the relationship between books and 'real life'. Thirdly, I considered whether depictions of child characters provide alternative representations of childhood that are not dominant in society, profiling autonomy instead of dependence. Finally, I looked at whether young people are the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them, looking in particular at the influence of gender and the presence of adults in and around the book. The research was undertaken with young people aged 10 to 14 years, concentrating on the lower and higher end of this age group. A total of 158 young people took part in a questionnaire survey and 43 young people in interviews. The research methods are considered in more detail in Chapter 3.

Children, childhood and children's books are all terms which are invested with different meanings. It is therefore important to examine briefly how they will be used in this study. How we describe ourselves depicts current norms but also how what is being described is culturally understood. Words for children and childhood are particularly subject to these nuances. Most straightforwardly, 'childhood' is the early part of the life course and 'child' as the 'human being living through that period' (Moss and Petrie, 2002:21). The term 'childhood', and its attribution to a particular part of human life, can be problematic. It can reduce, as Qvortrup suggests, the characteristics of childhood to 'ascriptive variables only – like age or dispositions putatively correlated with age as for instance immaturity, irresponsibility, competence, incapacity etc' (1994:4). Instead, Qvortrup states, childhood should be seen more positively with its own attributes and value. Corsaro (2005) suggests that childhood is constructed, with children as temporary incumbents but with childhood itself being a permanent structure which varies in how it

is understood over time. Childhood, however, does not exist solely because of its relationship to biological growth; it also exists because of its 'otherness' to adulthood. One cannot be without the presence of the other.

The length of period of time that a person is a child is socially constructed as well as delineated by biological development. For most people, being a child starts at the point of birth. It is more complicated to determine when being a child ends; ages of capacity and majority often depend on what is accepted in legislation or common practice as well as being an approximation of when children reach adult physical maturity (James, 2005). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognises the special status of children and defines a child as all those from birth to those under 18 years of age. Both children and adults differentiate between different physical developmental stages of childhood using words such as 'baby', 'toddler' and 'teenager'. Using these terms after a child has passed these stages attributes negative characteristics to the young person. The 10 year old child who is called a 'baby' is being told to 'be their age'. The young adolescent being called a 'child' is having his or her autonomy undermined. Aitken suggests that 'the plasticity of terms such as child and adolescent begs for more nuances than offered by traditional educational and developmental theories' (2001: 6). They do not describe fully enough the experience of being young and the transitions that children experience during childhood. The term 'child' is also used to ascribe social status in 'in relation and contradistinction to adulthood' and as a description of kinship (Mayall, 2002: 191); being a child is placed in the position of otherness to adulthood. Children themselves rarely get asked how they want to be described by adults. In Opie's (1993) study the children who took part in the ethnographic research (and who were generally younger than those in this study) called themselves 'people', removing age from the descriptor. The word 'child' and other terms associated with being young therefore have complex meanings.

In this thesis, 'children' and 'young people' will be generally used throughout the text. Both terms will be used in order to reflect the transitional experiences that children have

as they move through the early part of the life course and in order not to 'fix' the age identity of this group of people. In line with much research practice with young participants, the term 'young people' will be used to describe those who took part in this study and who were aged between 10 and 14 years old. The use of 'young people' is not to undermine their 'child' status, but to draw attention to the fact that they belong to an older group of children and therefore are seen to have increasing autonomy and agency.

Like 'children' and 'childhood', the terms used to describe books for children are also complex and, as Hollindale (1997) suggests, open to several definitions. In this thesis, children's books will be generally used. The term 'children's literature' appears to ascribe a particular set of values to texts with the power to make these distinctions lying with adults, and usually adults with a specialist perspective. Sarland suggests that the term is problematic and has connotations of the 'good and the true' (1991:1). Reading literature, as opposed to books or fiction, is traditionally regarded as positive culturally although it is frequently perceived as an elitist practice, with attendant assumptions based on power and privilege (Watson 1992a). It implies that some fictional works are not viewed as being sufficiently worthy of inclusion in this category. This 'poor relation' of 'literature' often includes, for example, science fiction, thrillers and romances which can be seen as more allied to popular culture than to literature. In addition, multimodal and multimedia texts are now part of children and young people's daily reading, a development which requires a more expansive term than 'literature' (Bearne, 2003a). It is therefore a term which suggests exclusive, rather than inclusive, judgements about a text. This is contradictory to the intention of children's literature and fantasy which are democratic in intent by 'being outside the solipsistic system of high culture' (Hunt and Lenz, 2001: 3).

Other terms such as 'texts' will also be used to describe a wider range of written materials, such as comics and magazines, and other media such as computer games. Books for young readers will be sometimes described in other ways, recognising again, that children and young people's age identities are not fixed. It will therefore take

account of the different descriptions for books targeted at different age groups such as young adult and teenage fiction. The study is predominantly focused on fictional texts although young people's wider reading interests are explored in Chapter 4.

There are a number of areas that this thesis does not consider. It does not analyse or critique children's books and does not suggest what may or may not be the literary merits of different books. This research does not explore young people's literacy skills. The influence of literacy on children's reading is acknowledged but assessing the reading abilities of those people who took part was not part of the study, although I recognise that young people's reading skills impact on how they encounter the text. On the other hand, the study does consider young people's reading interests. The research therefore explores the influences on young people's reading in order to better understand young people's relationships to texts rather than how well children and young people can read. Although the focus of this study might suggest otherwise, it is not assumed that reading is privileged above other aspects of young people's lives. I do not intend to suggest that reading fiction is a 'better' activity than the other activities in which young people participate.

This introductory chapter has explored the rationale for the subject of the study, young people's views on childhood in children's books. The following points will shape my arguments over the following chapters.

How childhood is conceptualised and understood in the early twenty first century is at the centre of this research. I agree with those who have argued that childhood is social constructed and that it has changed over time and according to the circumstances in which it is considered. Constructions of childhood will be used as the reflective tool to consider the relationship between young people's views and books throughout this thesis.

However, there are contradictions in how childhood is understood by adults who are the dominant constructors of this part of the life course. This results in a tension between

viewing children and young people as social actors, competent beings with the right to participate in society, and as human becomings, in transition to achieving the full status and rights associated with being an adult. The relationship between these two perspectives impacts on many aspects of children's experience, leading to confused interpretations of children's capacity to participate in co-constructing their lives. The thesis is underpinned by an acceptance of childhood theorists' position that children and young people are social agents. This in turn influences the methods of inquiry with young people engaged as participants in the study.

Children's books, like other cultural products for children and young people, provide ideological sources for constructing and understanding childhood. This is because of their cultural role in representing childhood to children and adults as well as the other educational and socialising purposes attributed to books for children. Children's books are written, produced and their use is mediated for children by adults. This relationship of adults to children's books emphasises a challenge at the heart of these cultural products; whether books do in fact provide a space for children and young people. The study considers young people's views, asking whether they have a role in constructing the childhoods they encounter in children's books or if they are less active recipients of adult produced representations.

The following chapters will explore the dynamic of the three inter-related areas, children, childhood and children's books, exploring the question 'what do young people think about the ways in which childhood is represented in children's books?'

Chapter 2 reviews the literature relating to childhood, children's books and children's reading and draws out the themes which are relevant to this study.

Chapter 3 explores the methodology that was used in the research.

Chapter 4 considers whether constructs of childhood are embedded in young people's reading experiences, drawing on the findings from the questionnaire survey on young people's reading interests and habits.

Chapter 5 explores young people's reflections on the relationship between books and 'real life' in order to consider whether children's books represent aspects of childhood experience which young people find credible.

Chapter 6 considers whether depictions of child characters provide an alternative representation of childhood that is not dominant in society by asking young people about characters in the books they read.

Chapter 7 considers if young people are the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them by exploring young people's views on the presence of gender and adults in the text.

Chapter 8 concludes the study, summarising the findings and drawing final conclusion.

¹ Children's Laureate: a children's writer or illustrator is appointed to this two year UK position to acknowledge outstanding achievement and to champion children's books.

² J.K. Rowling, author of series of seven books about Harry Potter, a boy wizard with special powers. These will be referred to as the Harry Potter books throughout this thesis.

³ *The DFC* weekly comic for children launched in 2008 <http://www.thedfc.co.uk/>

⁴ BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6359363.stm>

⁵ Alex Rider: leading male character in series of books by Anthony Horowitz (2004) about a young secret agent

⁶ Lyra; leading female character in *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman (2001)

⁷ Where a series of books is discussed in the thesis, the first or most well known of the books is referenced for information.

Chapter 2 Constructing childhood and children's books

Within us, still within us, always within us, childhood is a
state of mind.

(Bachelard, 1971: 130)

This study seeks to understand young people's views on childhood in the books they read. The combination of these different elements, young people's perspectives, understanding childhood and the relationship of children's books to both, draws on a range of academic interests. As Prout suggests, childhood is complex and requires a 'broad set of intellectual resources, an inter-disciplinary approach and an open-minded process of enquiry' (Prout, 2005:2). This position emphasises the importance of using holistic tools to understand children and childhood but it also throws up challenges which arise from drawing on such diverse sources. In this chapter, I explore those areas which have provided the underpinning directions for this study and reflect my theoretical interests. However, I acknowledge that other literatures could also have provided starting points and insights, adding other dimensions to the subject of this study.

In the context of these provisos, a number of areas were integral to the thesis. Firstly, the sociology of childhood provides the theoretical basis for this study. This approach asserts the position of children as social agents while acknowledging and analysing the impact on society of the historically more dominant view of the developing child. Secondly, the chapter draws on academic perspectives on children's books in order to explore the ways in which texts for children are linked to these understandings of childhood. This chapter focuses on writings which consider the particular attributes of children's books with an underlying emphasis on the relationship of books to children and childhood. These provide the literary resources for this study rather than those which critically analyse children's books. I also have drawn on writings on children's culture and media throughout the thesis. These have been helpful because of the range of empirical work with children, the overt consideration of constructs of childhood and, as Drotner and Livingstone (2008)

point out, the interest of researchers of children's cultural studies in social science thinking. I briefly consider children and young people's engagement with books, taking account of influences which impact on young people's reading. Finally, I highlight the broad themes that underpin the study throughout this chapter.

Constructing childhood

Childhood is at the centre of this thesis. As a consequence, it is necessary to consider the discourses associated with analysing and understanding modern childhood and to which children's books also contribute. Childhood has been identified in recent decades as a contested and socially constructed part of the life course by those aligned with the sociology of childhood (Archard, 1993; Corsaro, 2005; James and Prout, 1997; James et al, 1998; Jenks, 2005; Lee, 2001; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup, 2005, Qvortrup et al, 1994). James et al suggest that describing childhood as socially constructed is 'to suspend a belief in or a willing reception of its taken-for-granted meanings' (1998:27). Assumptions cannot be made about what is childhood; it has to be understood in more complex ways, requiring inquiry and scrutiny. Jenks states that:

Childhood is to be understood as a social construct; it makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society but which are incorporated within the social structure and thus manifested through and formative of certain typical forms of conduct.
(Jenks, 2005: 6-7)

There is no firm basis for defining childhood as what we understand is not fixed and has changed over time and across different environments and settings. It is 'historically, culturally and socially variable' (Buckingham, 2000:6). Examining childhood is therefore a fluid enterprise which has to take account of shifts and changes, not only in relation to the past but also as part of the contemporary experience of childhood. However, how childhood is understood is also embedded in the institutions of its time, society and culture and can be locked into particular ways of interpreting childhood. These constructions are present across all facets of society including education and child welfare services (Moss and Petrie, 2002) and in

different cultural representations of childhood (Buckingham, 2003; Cunningham, 2006; Higgonet, 1998). This includes children's books.

Childhood is subject to different interpretations even though it is a fundamental and shared part of human experience. The temporal fluidity of childhood means that understandings from previous generations impact on the present. But childhood is also invested with aspirations for the future; how those who are young now will contribute to society when they reach adulthood (Stephens, 1995). Children and young people in the present live their own experience of childhood, affected by both, the weight of the past and hopes for the future. Moss and Petrie emphasise the importance of the 'now' of childhood, stating that childhood should have an importance beyond those 'of waiting, anticipation and preparation' (2002:102). The experience of childhood is influenced by its relationship to the past, present and future.

Jenkins (1998) suggests that there are several strands in writing on childhood. The first examines the meanings that children carry for adults. The second considers historical perspectives on changes in the relations between children and adults. The third explores children's position as 'cultural and social agents' (Jenkins, 1998:3). This study is committed to investigating the third area, children as social agents in the context of their engagement with books. The two other themes that Jenkins (1998) describes are also highly relevant to this study. Children read books from a stockpile of fiction from previous generations which reflect past and historical understandings of childhood. Their lives are shaped by adults who are influenced by their own previous experiences of childhood. Adults are the producers of children's books and the meanings that children carry for adults are woven through children's books and other forms of culture. There is therefore a continuum of experiences and ideas which influence the relationship between children, adults and children's books.

The study is profoundly influenced by current thinking on children's lives exemplified by the sociology of childhood. Given an impetus by the seminal work of Ariès (1962) in the 1960s, which instigated a debate about the social construction of childhood, the last twenty years have seen a significant development in a conceptual

framework which draws attention to the particular experience of children (Archard, 1993; Corsaro, 2005; James et al, 1998; James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup et al, 1994). Childhood theorists and researchers have explored how different constructs of childhood, the child as social agent and as human becoming, have influenced attitudes to children and childhood. However, the modelling of different constructs of childhood by theorists, often placing one discourse in opposition to another, suggests that it is relatively uncomplicated to discern which mode of thinking about childhood is dominant at any one time. The developing child is seen in counterpoint to the young social agent. It is questionable whether these interpretations of childhood can be so easily separated. This study reflects on if, and how, the two constructs interact in young people's engagement with books.

Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches in order to develop a better understanding of contemporary childhood has resulted in a greater recognition of the impact of economic, social and cultural factors on children (Qvortrup et al, 1994). This recognition accepts children's status as independent agents as well as their position as dependants of adults and as part of relationship groupings such as families (Mayall, 2002). As a result, children have been acknowledged to have their own 'activities and their own time and their own space' (Qvortrup, 1994:4). The developing sociological discourse has ensured that there is greater recognition of children as social actors in their own right (James et al, 1998; Mayall, 2002). This perspective, according to Leonard, 'challenges the tendency to see children not so much as different to adults but as lesser from adults' (2006: 1119). Children's 'minority status' (Mayall, 2002) has been questioned. As a result, there have been considerable developments in how children and childhood are regarded. There are now 'new ways of speaking, writing and imaging children' which enable young people to be seen as more 'active, knowledgeable and socially participative' than previously (Prout, 2005: 7). Both children and adults can now be regarded as participants in constructing childhood (Corsaro, 2005).

Parallel to sociological approaches to childhood and similarly influential, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), an international human rights

convention, has promoted the agency of children and their right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. It has positioned children as a distinct group with human rights and, according to Moss and Petrie (2002) makes their position as 'other' to adults more overt. The Convention has also had an influence in the UK on public policy for children where there has been an increasing demand to secure the involvement of children as users and beneficiaries of services (Mayall, 2002). There is now a more widely held commitment to ensuring that children are regarded as citizens across many aspects of society, rather than as adults-in-waiting. This has had a particular influence on the participation of children and young people in public life and society. Children have become more visible as commentators on their own lives with a growth in research, consultations, education programmes and organisations where children and young people have a more significant role (Davis and Hill, 2006; Hill et al, 2004, Mayall, 2002; Stafford et al, 2003). These different initiatives, although often confined to education and social welfare settings, reflect a greater societal assertion of children's capacities.

New theoretical and rights based approaches have generated research and services which are more responsive to children. But, although there have been significant developments in seeing children as active participants, it has been difficult to shift a more longstanding and embedded view that children are unable to make substantial contributions to society. Morrow (2007) suggests that seeing children as human beings is still a dominant perspective in spite of the new commitments to children's social agency. The Children's Rights Alliance for England (2006), a children's rights organisation which analyses policy and practice in relation to children, points out that society, on the whole, still does not treat or see children as competent agents who are able to make decisions. There are therefore ambiguous messages about the extent to which children are seen as social agents and competent beings. This has implications for all aspects of children's lives including representations of childhood. There is not a consistency about which discourse is dominant.

By contrast with sociological considerations of childhood which have profiled children's position as social actors, there is a more traditional and historically

recognised approach to childhood which casts it as a momentary staging post on the journey to adult maturity (Corsaro, 2005; James and Prout, 1997). According to this perspective, the child is seen 'for what they are not rather than positively for what they are in themselves' (Archard and Macleod, 2002:2). A view of children as adults-in-the-making has been led particularly by the discipline of developmental psychology, resulting in children being perceived as 'relatively passive experimental subjects' (Sutton-Smith, 1995: 4). This should not be seen as a dismissal of the discipline. The work of developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky has been instrumental in increasing an understanding of children's development and learning. Piaget developed a theoretical framework for understanding child development, based on the idea that children had an active role in the development of their cognitive abilities and that these abilities progressed through stages as they reached different ages (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969). Corsaro (2005) emphasises that Piaget's theories are relevant to the sociology of childhood as they remind us that the way that children see and organise their view of the world is different to that of adults. Vygotsky considered that language was important for reproducing culture and that development happened as a result of dealing with everyday problems and through interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1962).

These developmental theories are part of the study of children and young people and remain highly influential (Prout, 2005). Piaget and Vygotsky did not, after all, ignore the possibilities of children's agency; it was integral, in some way, to their theories of development. But these theories do not include the full spectrum of social, cultural, political and economic influences that affect children and young people (Corsaro, 2005). Nor do these theories assert children's competences (James et al, 1998), focusing instead on the development of skills in the individual child. Sociological theories, on the other hand, aim to seek out and include other interpretations of childhood, linking to wider understandings of society and childhood's relationship to other parts of the life course. Children, after all, have a role in participating in the 'collective, communal activity' of society and in the 'reproduction' of society and culture (Corsaro, 2005: 18). So biologically determined approaches to child development have made an important contribution but have also

resulted in limitations in how childhood is understood (Mayall, 2002). James (2005) suggests that there has been another consequence. The emphasis of developmental psychology has driven an age-based 'wedge' between adults and children, with children assessed as being competent depending on their age and therefore diminishing their capacity (James, 2005). Jenks (2005) reminds us that Piaget's theories are ordered by age and by hierarchy so that the very young have low status because of their developmental state and adults have high status because they have achieved optimum levels of growth. However, sociologists do not suggest that these approaches to understanding childhood should be put aside. Prout (2005) states it is unhelpful to ignore or diminish the role of developmental understandings of children. He argues for a reworking of the relationship between the two approaches to childhood, emphasising that it is still a dominant and relevant discipline in relation to childhood. Although this study is committed to sociological positioning on childhood, I concur with Prout (2005) that developmental understandings of children cannot be ignored.

The view of the developing child also sits alongside a number of subtly differentiated constructs of childhood which are reflected in history, culture, social policy and societal attitudes (Cunningham; 1995; Hendrick; 2003; James et al, 1998; Jenkins, 1998; Moss and Petrie, 2002; Wyness, 2000). At their most straightforward, these perspectives view children as developing human beings who do not yet have the skills or competences to achieve citizenship status associated with adulthood (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994). They have to learn how to be fully human in order to have access to a supposedly settled status in the life course. En route they will pass certain developmental milestones which will credit them with increasing autonomy until they become adults. This view of the developing child, whose moral status increases as he or she matures, is widely accepted (Archard and Macleod, 2002).

It can, however, also lead to other understandings of childhood which position children in opposition to adulthood. So, in simplistic terms, children can be regarded as naive and malleable, 'empty vessels'. Their immaturity and innocence denies them rights to be regarded as full citizens or to have the experience to make valid contributions to society. For children who are vulnerable because of violence or

abuse, an authoritative position is taken, resulting in a tension between an assertion of adults' responsibility to protect children and young people's right to have their views taken into account. Qvortrup suggests that there is a dilemma about 'what the limits of protection are and how protection and participation are offset against one another' (2005: 7) with children marginalised by an emphasis on their supposed vulnerability. Kincaid (1992) says that the myth that is attached to childhood innocence takes away the child's agency. Children who are innocent do not have the right or the expertise to fully participate. They have to be protected from the adult world (Jenkins, 1998).

In contrast with a view of childhood as a time of innocence, children and young people can also be seen as troublesome and in extremis, as evil (James et al, 1998). In the case of children and young people who are seen to be failing in some way or whose behaviour is regarded as socially unacceptable or breaks the law, their childhood status is not necessarily regarded as a mitigating influence. Children can become demonised according to the UK's Children's Commissioners (UK Children's Commissioners, 2008). Polarised descriptions of childhood are therefore used to construct responses to societal problems, dominating debates about behaviour and punishment as well as pervading other areas such as education and cultural representations of childhood (Cunningham, 2006). James and James (2008) point out that government in the UK is retrenching on approaches which recognise children's agency in favour of measures which control their behaviour. As Buckingham (1993) states:

If children are typically defined as innocent and impressionable, they are also seen as potential monsters, who are in need of adult 'protection'.

(Buckingham, 1993: 4)

A greater commitment to children's agency in today's society can reveal other tensions between children and adults. Childhood is overseen and regulated by adults (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994). Children are also dependent on adults for support, guidance and the resources for survival. Adults therefore have power over children and young people across all aspects of their lives including the two significant axes

of childhood, home and school. Ennew notes that 'children inhabit spaces within an adult-constructed world' and are often restricted to institutions such as schools which are designated as children's spaces (1994: 125). Mayall (2002) highlights that there is an increasing 'scholarisation' of childhood with more constraints on children's time due to the demands of the education system. Children's lives are therefore carefully monitored and governed (Rose, 1989).

Adult dominated environments, physical, social or cultural, can become places of contention and collision for children and adults (Ennew, 1994). There is a reluctance, for example, to let young people be out in public space without adult supervision and a greater sense of parental and societal caution about young people's developing independence and physical mobility (Gill, 2007; O'Brien et al, 2000; Valentine, 1996). At the same time a sense of disappointment is expressed variously by parents, children and young people and policymakers about this loss of freedom, with comparisons made by adults to their own, often perceived as freer, experiences of childhood (Gill, 2007; Jones, 2001; Livingstone, 2002; Philo, 2003). There is a lack of consistency and confusion about how much independence and autonomy young people should have. These ambiguous reactions are pertinent across childhood experiences.

The structuring of adult-child relations influences all aspects of childhood including cultural products and representations. Adults are the creators and producers of children's books and also mediate culture for children (Jenkins, 1998). Adults, as is reiterated throughout the study, have particular expectations of what books should 'do' for children in providing educational and socialising opportunities. Children's books can offer a depiction of childhood that is in line with adults' interests and concerns. This suggests that the nature of the interaction between adults and children in and around books can provide an insight into different understandings of childhood. Hunt points out that the relationship between 'children and childhood and adults and adulthood is extremely complex and is continuously reflected in the books' (2001:5).

Adults' perspectives on childhood are, of course, heavily influenced by the continuity of their experience between childhood and adulthood. Adults do not leave childhood once they have reached adulthood; it is a truism to say that the experience of childhood permeates through all aspects of adults' life experiences (Jones, 2001; Treacher, 2000). As Jones (2003) reminds us, adults have all been smaller, less experienced and dependent upon the previous generation of adults. Childhood is therefore unique as part of the life course in that it is shared by all humans.

Adults' distance from childhood comes from the generational spacing which is sometimes of a few years and sometimes of several decades (Mayall, 2001). Adults also attempt to bridge this gap in different situations by drawing on memories of their own childhoods. The use of memories is a powerful and pervasive influence (Hollindale, 1997; Jones 2003; Philo, 2003; Spigel, 1998; Treacher, 2000). As Buckingham states, adults are caught up with 'nostalgia for a past Golden Age of freedom and play' (2000: 9). Jenks suggests that adults see childhood as providing a grounding which is "nostalgic" because modern day change is so unsettling (2005: 112). In spite of an emotional attachment to childhood as a lucid space in a fragmented post modern world, adults' presumption of their superior generational experience means that they are still committed to a view of children as inexperienced rather than competent. This can influence adults' views on all aspects of childhood culture including children's books.

This study explores young people's views on representations of childhood in books by accepting the theoretical position that children and young people are social actors. This intimates that the different spaces of childhood are not wholly in the gift of adults; children can also contribute to their creation. The implications of this positioning are wide ranging, challenging the power, not only of adults, but potentially of adult constructed institutional settings and cultures. To accept the notion of children's capacity suggests that they are not just the recipients of the cultural products that are presented to them. They also have a role in finding and making their own meanings in texts (Kinder, 1999). Children and young people can be active constructors and co-constructors of representations of childhood.

Buckingham (2000) writing about children and television proposes a more nuanced position. He indicates that there are limitations to a view of children as an active audience, suggesting that this viewpoint is in danger of being a 'rhetorical platitude' with the 'romantic figure of the 'media-wise' child' dominating debate (Buckingham, 2000:116). Buckingham states that accepting a view that children are active participants without question ignores the fact that there are gaps in children and young people's knowledge as well as underestimating the power of corporations in securing children's consumption of their products. He goes on to suggest that replacing the developmental notion of the 'incompetent' child with the sociologically 'competent' child is simplistic and oppositional (Buckingham, 2000). Buckingham's perspective is a useful reminder that committing theoretically to children's agency should not undermine a scrutiny of whether young people are always active participants. The tension between the constructions of childhood, children as developing beings and as social agents, therefore provides a thematic framework for the study. I ask the question whether children's books, in fact, enable children and young people 'to construct accounts of their lives in their own terms' (Holloway and Valentine, 2000:8).

Constructing childhood in children's books

In this next section, I consider how children's books are related to discourses of childhood in their purposes and production. The links between understandings of childhood and children's books are longstanding and profound. Stories in their written, oral and visual forms have always been seen to have a particular importance for children and young people. They represent collective and individual experiences as well as giving creative opportunities for readers to explore new imaginative territories. As Hourihan (1997) states:

Stories are important in all cultures. People have always used stories to render the vast heterogeneity of experience meaningful, to explain the behaviour of the physical universe and to describe human relations and society.

(Hourihan, 1997: 1)

In addition to the pleasures that stories give, societies want knowledge to be passed from one generation onto the next. Stories offer one way of ensuring this takes place (Kline, 1993; Zipes, 2001). As Kline states ‘narrative gives expression to mythic explanations of the world and provides the templates of a culture’ (1993: 77).

Narratives, and therefore stories, also have a place in contributing to a sense of self and the development of identity (Bruner, 1986; Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992). The relationship between self and stories is not passive or neutral. Zahavi states that stories do not only provide a reminder of what happened but also provide ‘continuing interpretations and reinterpretations of our lived lives’ (2007:181). Storytelling has a central role in sharing knowledge and developing understanding of self and community.

Before the advent of widespread printing and literacy, oral storytelling to children was prevalent (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992). Children’s books, however, are not a recent phenomenon. Historically, children’s books for children have been published since the mid eighteenth century, almost in step with the publication of the first English novel. One of the first children’s books published in English was Newbery’s *A Little Pocket Book* in 1744 which was sold with a gift, a ball for boys and a pincushion for girl readers and was advertised as being for the instruction and amusement of its readers (Hunt, 2001; Quayle, 1983). Stories were used then, as now, by adults to caution children against dangers and to socialise and educate children. Even in the eighteenth century, fiction ‘served a function in acculturating the child and molding his or her reading habits in light of specific socioeconomic needs’ (Zipes, 2001:47). By the nineteenth century, the moralistic nature of earlier books had been diminished with books for children providing fantasy and adventure ‘in a boundless quest to stimulate everychild’s imagination’ (Kline, 1993:80). In the twenty first century, the two imperatives, providing imaginative spaces for children and the educational and socialising role of books, still co-exist. In fact, stories are everywhere in contemporary society and exist in oral, written, visual, physical and musical forms. Cobley suggests that ‘human consciousness is now suffused with narrative’ (2001: 209). Traditional fictional texts continue to have a particular place, solidifying narrative by capturing the precise

words of the author. In this printed form, stories can have a readership which continues across generations. This form of fiction still maintains its high cultural status in spite of new and evolving ways of producing narrative through digital technologies.

The term ‘children’s books’ implies a specific genre of books which is written, published and sold with a child audience in mind. It encompasses books for very small children and babies, through to illustrated stories for younger readers and novels for older children and young adults. ‘Children’s literature’, as Watson (2000) states, is a generic term covering all texts published for children (See Chapter 1 for a discussion of the use of the term ‘children’s books’ in this study). Books for children exist as a discrete group of texts because children are regarded as different to adults. The definition of what is children’s literature is central to what children’s books are about: it is focused on relationships with children (Hunt, 2005). Childhood is at the centre of books for children and young people.

Some adult centric commentators and critics have compared children’s books unfavourably with that for adults, viewing the subject matter to be superficial and the use of language and literary structure to be simplistic in comparison with the ‘for adults’ form (Hunt, 1991). Within this mode of thinking, children’s books are regarded primarily as learning tools, naïve and easy (too easy) to read. Experts in children’s literature vociferously argue the contrary, pointing out that there is a particular ‘richness, diversity and vitality’ in children’s literature (Hunt, 1991: 21). In line with a view of children’s books being unsophisticated, there is also a perception that children’s books and their writers are second best in comparison with the ‘big league’ of adult literature. Books written for children are perceived to have a ‘humble’ place on the margins of English literature (Watson, 1992b). The subject matter of children’s books is seen to make them unworthy of adult consideration (Hunt, 1991). This is also influenced by a view that child readers are a less important audience in an adult centred world, culturally, socially and economically. Devaluing childhood and children’s literature go hand in hand (Hollindale, 1997). This extends to other cultural products associated with children. Popular culture for children also has a low status (Kinder, 1999; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002). This is not

surprising if, as was suggested in the previous section, children are not regarded as full citizens with agency. The position of children's cultural products is compatible with their lowly status.

Children's books come to be defined as for children, either because they are written by the author for a specific child audience or they have qualities which are particularly attractive to children, thereby becoming 'children's books' (Chambers, 1995). Some disagree with the notion of a separate group of books for children, linking it to discourses about the existence of childhood. Zipes suggests that if we take 'ownership' and 'possession' literally then there is no such thing as children's books as a literature 'conceived *by* children *for* children' (2001:40). They, children's books, do not exist and are as artificially constructed as notions of childhood. Rose (1993), in her work which deconstructs the notion that *Peter Pan* was written by J.M. Barrie for children, says that children's fiction is based on the impossibility of the relationship between the adult and child. Children's books are predicated, Rose (1993) says, on the belief that there is a child that can be spoken to through the book. But this child is absent and unknowable. Jacqueline Rose (1993) acknowledges that her deductions are made without reference to a child reader's experience of the book. Ultimately what are categorised as children's books are chosen because of a consensus of view by both adults and children (Townsend, 1983). Such generational agreement is a reminder of the presence of adults in young people's relationship to books. However, although children's books are 'colonized' by adults who are focused on needs not directly related to children as readers, children are still active participants and recipients of children's books (Watson, 1992b).

Children's books are not understood to be texts written by children in the way that the term 'feminist literature' implies both a readership and an authorial position (Hollindale, 1997) as there are only rare exceptions of published books that have been written by children. Children's books are almost always written by adults. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) state that the absence of children's voices in print reflects a dismissal of children's texts in our culture. Even an oral culture of stories by children and young people has held 'a very dubious status' (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992: 35). High status is given to adult artists,

authors, film makers who depict children but low status is given to the production of texts by children. There are examples of children and young people's writing on the internet in journals and comics (Zipes, 2001). This development has increased significantly recently with the growth in social networking on the internet, storyboarding sites and web blogs, used by children and young people across the age groups. The internet is now a place of 'virtual popular culture', providing another cultural space for children (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002). The formal world of children's books, however, is not one that they contribute to creating (Zipes, 2001). If low status is given to the production of texts by children and young people, their perspectives on the books they read is rarely encountered in studies of children's books (Watson, 2000). Children and young people are not the producers of books (or of other forms of formal culture) for their own consumption.

As writers of children's books are adults, they are texts for a non-peer audience and commentators on children's literature continually revisit this conundrum (Hunt, 2005). Rose (1993) suggests that children's books position the child as an outsider with adult desires predominant in an unequal relationship. Adults themselves read the text in quite a different way to children according to Hunt (1991). Children's books are critiqued by adults who will not be reading the text in the context of its implied readership, children. Instead, adults will be reading books for a variety of reasons. They may be reading a text in order to censor or recommend the books within a professional (as a teacher) or personal context (as a parent) (Hunt, 1991). They may be reading in order to discuss it with other adults as educationalists or critics. Rarely, Hunt says will an adult be reading with an acceptance of the implied audience surrendering '*to the book on its terms*' (Hunt, 1991:48). However, although the adult reader may be well intentioned in immersing themselves in the book, their perspectives are likely to be muddled by their past experience as a child:

Do you read as the child you were or as the child you are? On your self-image as a child or the memory of the 'feel' of youthful reading? How far can experienced readers forget their adult experience?

(Hunt, 1991: 48)

Adults carry the weight of their adulthood when they read books for children. Their reading experiences will therefore be different to that of children.

Books for children have also been strongly influenced by qualities of which adults and society in general approves at any given time (Avery, 1983). Books for children are therefore important ideologically (Hollindale, 1997; Hunt, 2005; Sarland, 2005; Stephens, 1992). This currency means that any book can become time expired as attitudes towards children and childhood move on, even if this is a superficial shift. Watson suggests that:

To think of children's books as a cultural space is a way of reminding ourselves that, though 'childhood' is undoubtedly an adult concept with a complex social history, there are no agreed versions of childhood which are simply imposed upon acquiescent children.

(Watson, 1992a: 7)

Children's books are transitory, of their time only. Books and other texts are read in the '*now* of childhood, not in the *then* of adults' early reading' (Meek, 1992:175). Books which are not being read by young readers (or promoted by adults) because they are seen to be dated or unacceptable in a changing literary and social climate disappear from the bookshelves or the publishers' lists. However, books are also powerful reminders of representations of childhood from previous times as well as having a particular significance in adults and children's memories of childhood (Kline, 1993).

How well books represent contemporary childhoods can be explored by considering whether books reflect 'reality'. Some books are overtly defined as belonging to a genre of literature called 'realism'. Cobley (2001) suggests that, for many commentators, novels are:

a noble attempt to place in narrative form the complexity of the social world and its contemporary flux.

(Cobley, 2001:88)

Books which are seen to be realistic relate to a familiar environment and draw on interpretations of social structures and habits. Literary artifice, however, still plays a

part in creating this representation. Jacqueline Rose (1993) in her seminal work on the ‘impossibility of children’s fiction’ states that:

Realism in children’s writing cannot be opposed to what is ‘literary’ or truly ‘aesthetic’, once it is seen that realism does not refer just to the content of what is described, but to a way of presenting it to the reader. Realism is a fully literary convention – one which is being asserted with increasing urgency in relation to fiction for the child.

(Rose, 1993: 65)

Rose emphasises that it is not only what the book is about that makes it realistic but also the literary style which presents the text in a particular way. She suggests that realism is a type of narrative which uses language in such a way that readers take it as ‘real’. Nikolajeva points out that there are flaws in identifying realism in books for young people. She emphasises that fiction is not a mirror to real life but it transforms reality through the creative process:

Realism as a literary device is confused with credibility or verisimilitude. However, unlike documentary or journalism, fiction is not a direct *reflection* of reality but an artistic *transformation* of it.

(Nikolajeva, 1996:189-190)

Defining books as being realistic or as belonging to a particular genre called ‘realism’ is confusing. The concept of ‘verisimilitude’ highlighted by Nikolajeva (1996) is more nuanced. It encompasses books across genres and types rather than those within a narrow category. All books and texts then have the potential to be realistic in some way. Todorov (1977), a French writer on structuralism, explores the connections between verisimilitude and reality in fiction:

verisimilitude is the mask which is assumed by the laws of the text and which we are meant to take for a relation with reality.

(Todorov, 1977: 83)

There is no need to accurately describe an object or happening to produce a reader’s sense of it being realistic. Instead, verisimilitude is based on common agreement about what is credible (Cobley, 2001). This indicates that establishing the verisimilitude, the likeness to truth, in children’s books does not have to lie with

adult constructors but can also be influenced by the views of young people. But this credibility is not static. It is also 'subject to change, revision and learning anew of its principles' (Cobley, 2001: 219) as well as being linked with knowledge about narrative style and genre. So what is accepted as a text which appears to be credible, truthful and realistic can change over time. This is particularly pertinent to children's books, allowing for the acceptability of constructions of childhood within books to evolve in tune with societal changes in attitudes.

Within the discourse of children's literature, Hollindale (1988) draws attention to two different professional approaches to children's literature: 'book people' and 'child people'. In his view, 'book' people consider the merits of adult judgements and relate to this to a literary analysis of texts (1988:4). 'Child' people on the other hand focus on the importance of children's judgements (Hollindale, 1988). This division, in Hollindale's view, has led to an unnecessary dissonance which has not allowed for the intertwining of a wider understanding of children's literature. This is not to underestimate the importance of the place of ideology in children's books. A literary form which has so many expectations attached to it is bound to find itself caught between differing positions. As well as the views of critics, commentators and academics, Hollindale indicates that ideology in children's books can also be embedded in an author's work with their 'social, political or moral beliefs' explicitly expressed through their writing (1988:10).

Although most children's writers have the overall aim of entertaining their readership, an ambitiously wide range of different roles and purposes are ascribed to children's books. Kline (1993) suggests that society always attaches purpose to children's culture. Books are in fact a commodity with different ideologies and values imbedded in the text's production and usage (Zipes, 2001). Children's books teach and please (Nodelman and Reimer, 2003). They encourage children to take on positive social values (Stephens, 1992). In educational terms, children's books are regarded as important in providing an opportunity for children to acquire and comprehend written language and to understand storytelling conventions as well as providing skills in literacy (Hourihan, 1997). In social terms, they provide an impetus to shape and form children's views, increase understanding of society and

wrestle with moral dilemmas. They enable children to discover other worlds and ask important questions (Meek, 1992). Stories provide cultural 'meeting places' where 'independence, innovation and imagination' are promoted (Bearne, 2000:183). In cultural terms, stories are regarded as an important building block in acquiring the skills for discerning what is perceived to be 'good literature' and increasing knowledge of cultural values (Zipes, 2001). In psychological terms, they provide a means of increasing emotional literacy and dealing with developmental transitions. They provide insights into our thoughts and feelings (Crago, 2005; Rollin and West, 1999). This multitude of demands means that there can be tensions between the different objectives and reveals 'the crowd of people intervening between writers and children' (Pearce, 1992: 29). Philippa Pearce, a children's author, goes on to say:

certain books are sometimes prescribed, as one might prescribe a medicine or tonic. They are prescribed not because they are good books but because they are supposed to be good for the reader, dealing helpfully (it is thought) with one or more of the problems that beset children.
(Pearce, 1992: 29)

The question is whether these many intentions affect the relationship between the author and the child reader or do they in actual fact enhance the reading experience by creating new diversions within the text. If a book reflects activities which are disapproved of, will it be able to meet the text's socialising purposes? If it gets too focused on providing pleasure and entertainment, is it still educational? Culture in its different forms and how it is passed from one generation to the next depends on a group of people, led by the elite in society (Zipes, 2001). As in adult literature, children's books are assessed and identified, by Zipes' elite, as those that are seen as 'high art' and those that are 'low art', popular culture. Bourdieu's (1984) theories about cultural capital affirm that this transmission is nurtured by dominant powerful groups. Cultural activity, including reading, is subject to the influences of education and home background with a hierarchy embedded within different cultural products (Bourdieu, 1984). The kinds of texts that are seen to be acceptable are usually decided by adults, sometimes even discreet groups of adults such as teachers and literary critics. This means that young people's reading choices can be criticised if

they belong to a group of texts that adults have decided are less culturally and educationally significant (Kinder, 1999; Wannamaker, 2008; Watson, 2000).

This process of defining what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ indicates that children’s books are intimately related with the wider popular culture of children. This includes media such as television and films, music, toys and games, comics and magazines and websites and computer games (Kinder, 1999; Marsh and Millard, 2000). Children’s fiction, particularly horror stories, romances and graphic novels, is often included within definitions of popular culture. Whether books are included in this cultural definition is based on value judgements about the educational worth of a particular genre of children’s books. In the absence of clear criteria for arriving at these critiques, these categorisations should be considered as subjective and arbitrary boundaries, based on the ambiguous views of academics and commentators. Jenkins et al suggest that popular culture generally is described by more traditional perspectives of academia as a ‘form of candy, pollution, or control’ (2002: 27). It is not seen as generally good for those who consume it but it is, on the other hand, embedded in young people’s way of life. Popular culture is penalised by being regarded as predominantly a leisure, rather than educational, activity (Buckingham, 1993).

Those in children’s literary and media studies argue that the idea of the children’s book as a closed form is no longer valid in the twenty first century as a multi-dimensional approach to texts is more appropriate (Hunt, 2001; Bearne, 2003a; Mackey, 2007). The book sits alongside the film or television programmes, the computer games and the merchandising attached to these forms. Children and young people increasingly have access to other forms of texts. New kinds of communication mean that children now think differently to adults who are more used to a ‘print-dominated world’ (Bearne, 2003b: 98). The book is not the only text available to children; it is one of several ‘textual practices vying for children’s attention’ (Alvermann, 2005: 242). This is particularly obvious in children’s books and is relevant to research with young people on the texts they read and enjoy. The connections between children’s fiction and popular culture are acknowledged in this study as there is not a consistently clear distinction between one form of children’s

culture and another; the difference lies in the value that adults and children attribute to texts and other cultural products.

The different perspectives in this section have explored how children's books and culture are entwined with constructions of childhood. Books are directly related to childhood in two significant ways. Childhood is represented within books. These books are also targeted at a child audience. This has implications for the depiction of fictional childhoods as books, like constructions of childhood, are generally mediated by adults. This means that books are not produced by their intended readership. It is not clear to what extent constructions of childhood within and around books are therefore influenced by children themselves. This is a central theme for the study; whether children and young people have a role in actively making meaning from texts in spite of this apparent adult dominance.

Books create, reflect and influence constructions of childhood in their content, production and consumption. The next section considers young people's relationship to books as consumers of books, as readers.

Constructing child readers

Children's books, as has been explored in the previous section, are texts for a non-peer audience, written, produced and facilitated by adults for children and young people. The nature of this relationship also means that understandings of childhood are at the heart of books for young people. In turn, any exploration of childhood and children's books has to acknowledge how young people engage with and relate to books as readers.

Skills and competences in literacy are given significant weight by society (Cook-Gumperz, 2006b). Children's reading abilities are monitored and scrutinised as indicators of success, failure, disadvantage and privilege. These are measured against literacy and educational objectives but are also seen as predictors of social and economic achievement across the life course. It improves not only the position of the individual but is assumed to impact positively on society as well (Cook-Gumperz, 2006a). Holden asserts that 'reading is a vitally important gateway to social,

economic and civic life' (2004:18). Assessments of young people's reading abilities are therefore often based on what they will become in the future; their competences as children are seen to correlate with potential success as adults. The UK government, in a HM Treasury policy review of children, states that there are long term costs to society if children and young people have literacy difficulties with low levels of attainment seen to be a significant indicator of poor outcomes when children reach adulthood (HM Treasury and Department for Education and Schools, 2007). Research by the KPMG Foundation identified the costs attached to a child failing to learn to read as between £44,797 and £53,098 (KPMG Foundation, 2006:3). Dugdale and Clark (2008) analyse existing research, including that of British longitudinal studies, and conclude that being literate has a close correlation with both happiness and success. Being able to read is seen to be an important societal signifier of personal and collective achievement. As an educational and leisure activity, it is also carefully monitored by adults. Hall and Coles (1999) state that children's literacy and their reading habits are:

of concern to several different groups of people: parents and teachers (frequently), politicians and the media (intermittently) and, of course, children themselves. It is a topic which can raise high levels of anxiety and moralism as adults contemplate perceived changes in reading habits and worry about sensationalism, consumerism and all the other possible malign 'isms' which might influence their children.
(Hall and Coles, 1999: xiii)

This adult focus on reading skills is not misplaced as a barometer of life chances. Research has shown that reading can counter the well established negative impacts of low income on educational achievement. A study across 31 countries found that a real enthusiasm for reading was more important than economic circumstances (Kirsch et al, 2002). Children from poorer families perform well in a school environment if they like reading comics, newspapers or books out of school, regardless of the socio-economic status of their parents (Kirsch et al, 2002). On the other hand, Clark and Foster's (2005) study of reading habits states that houses with lower incomes had fewer print resources than those in higher income brackets, highlighting the disadvantage that some children and young people have in accessing

texts which can promote their reading skills. In addition, children and young people who take up free school meals are more likely to have a negative view of reading for pleasure and report themselves as less proficient in reading (Clark and Foster, 2005).

Concern about the position of contemporary childhood manifests itself through rigorous examinations of how well children and young people are doing in different aspects of their lives with reading ability seen to be one important measure of young people's progress and achievement. Anxiety about young people's performance in reading is reflected in extensive research undertaken to find out if young people can read, how much they are reading, what they are reading and how their age, race, class and gender impact on their reading interests (Clark and Foster, 2005; Hall and Coles, 1999; Maynard et al, 2007; Sainsbury and Clarkson, 2008; Twist et al, 2003; Twist et al, 2007). Research on reading shows a complex picture with a number of contradictions and ambiguities highlighted, demonstrating that finding the answers to what children and young people can and do read requires scrutiny from a number of different perspectives. On one hand, children and young people are reading with over 70 per cent of six to 14 year olds reading fiction (Book Marketing, 2000). But, while young people recognise the importance of reading, they are doing less of it in a leisure context (Book Marketing, 2000). In an international study of 35 countries, although English children aged 10 years came third in terms of reading ability (with Scotland ranked fourteenth), they were generally less confident and did not enjoy reading as much as children in other countries (Twist et al, 2003). On the other hand, a survey of children's reading carried out by the National Literacy Trust showed that half the pupils (approximately 4000) enjoyed reading 'very much' or 'quite a lot' (Clark and Foster, 2005). An Ofsted (2004) report on reading in primary schools found that most pupils were positive about reading but those who did not make progress in reading developed poor attitudes.

Debates about children's reading are in parallel with concerns about other activities in which they engage. These include, for example, concerns about whether young people's access to computers, television, mobile phone and films are compromising the (more) highly valued fictional reading experience. This links with more longstanding debates on the potential negative role of media such as television in

children's lives (Postman, 1983). There is evidence which shows that reading for pleasure is under siege by out of school pursuits and different media. Books have high value as culture carriers but they are less used by children and young people than other forms culture such as television (Kline, 1993). Livingstone and Bovill's (1999) work shows that children choose to watch television and play computer games rather than reading books with a more recent study showing that 75 per cent of young people access the internet from a home computer (Livingstone and Bober, 2005). Hopper (2005) also states that there is a drop in reading among young people with other forms of culture such as television, mobile phone and computers seen to be contributing to this trend. These and other research findings are likely to become rapidly out of date as computer and games technology becomes cheaper and more widely available. Although there is concern about the impact of television and computers, others, particularly those with an interest in popular culture, propose a less harsh view of these forms of culture for children (Buckingham, 2000). Marsh and Millard (2000) emphasise that computer games lie within an 'intertextual world' of cultural products which can add to children's reading opportunities rather than diminish them. Drotner (2005) suggests that different kinds of media such as television, print, radios and computers are merging. Access to different cultural products adds to a menu of different kinds of texts from which young people can choose.

How children 'encounter' a text and what meaning they derive from the experience are also central to understanding young people's reading identities. Hunt, exploring the differences between adult and child readers, says that children are 'in the process of learning societal and literary norms' (1991:11). Readers do not necessarily 'find' the meanings that authors intend. Children, especially younger children, will know less about language, the structure of books and norms of storytelling and will have a different understanding of fact, realism and fantasy (Hunt, 1991). Making links between texts, understanding their allusions and being knowledgeable about the attributes of different genres, are skills that develop from the experience of reading as well from exposure to other cultural experiences. All of these will impact on how a child reads a book and how successful adult writers are in communicating with

children. Bruner (2003) reminds us that the unexpected of games and stories attracts even the very young. Within us is 'some predisposition, some core knowledge about narrative from the start' (Bruner, 2003:33). What young people know about reading books is influenced by their experiences of other media (Mackey, 2007). Children's experience of television narrative can be imported into their encounters with books (Mackey, 2007).

Children and young people's reading and comprehension skills are at different stages depending on age and on their individual experience. During children's development, they will have evolving understandings of fundamental issues about life that will be reflected in children's books. They may also be more open to 'genuinely radical thought and the ways of understanding texts' (Hunt, 1991: 57). They will potentially take their experience and understanding of play into encounters with books (Hunt, 1991). Hourihan says that readers 'construct meanings related to their own lives and to the society they live in' (1997:5) and books need to be explored in a wide cultural context. The text may be read at a different time from when it was produced, potentially giving rise to other kinds of interpretation. This is a reminder that childhood is not a 'stable concept', both for individual children as they move through developmental stages but also as to how childhood is regarded in societal terms (Hunt, 1991:60).

Although *how* young people read is not the focus of this study, the work on reader-response theory and other approaches to developing the understanding of relationship between texts and readers are helpful in asserting that meaning is far more complex than a literary critiquing of a novel or having the literacy skills to comprehend the textual language. The reader or the identities that he or she brings to the text cannot be ignored and is now an accepted way of understanding readers as both active and engaged (Bearne, 2003a). Rosenblatt (1978) states that there is no single way to read a text. Readers make meaning from the written word drawing on their experiences (Benton, 2005). Iser (1978) and Fish (1980) assert that that it is the reader's own interpretation of the text which is of central importance rather than critical readings which ignore the 'real' and 'implied' reader. Appleyard, in his consideration of theories about the act of reading, states that:

the story is an event that has roots both in the text and in the personality and history that the reader brings to the reading.
(Appleyard, 1994: 9)

Young people's life experiences as well as their textual experiences therefore contribute to the process of engaging with a fictional text.

Exploring meaning in the context of one text is not sufficient as has been suggested in the previous discussion on books and popular culture. Influenced by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Kristeva (1986) emphasises that it is important to take other textual meanings into account as texts have meaning when they relate to other texts; 'any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (Kristeva, 1986: 37). The concept of 'intertextuality' has become a common term to describe the influences of texts on each other, including those in other media. The relationships between readers, texts, and what is socially and culturally significant is important for a theoretical understanding of children's books (Stephens, 1992; Wilkie-Stubbs, 2005). This understanding becomes increasingly important in the twenty first century as young people engage with more versions of texts through books, magazines, films, television and computer based narratives and bring this diverse knowledge to bear on their reading of fictional texts (Mackey, 2007). On the other hand, children and young people are entering a 'cultural world' which is already formed (Kress, 2004). Zipes suggests that the implied readers of children's books are the 'editor/agent/publisher' then the 'teacher/librarian/parents' and finally the children (2001:44). The activity of young people reading books is therefore not a quiet encounter between a reader, author and the text but instead is a noisier and more interactive engagement with a wider cast of cultural influences and experiences.

Implied reader theories contribute to an understanding of how childhood is represented in books through the prism of young people, rather than through an adult focused literary analysis. However, this theoretical basis provides only a partial knowledge. Hunt (1995) and Benton (2005) suggest that little is known about how readers experience texts. Bruner states 'we know precious little indeed about the 'reader-in-the-text' as a psychological process' (1986:5). Understanding the relationship between the act of reading and the reader is therefore not straightforward

and is subject to many influences. This has implications for this study, highlighting that exploring young people's views on relationships with representations in books has to acknowledge the way in which young people interact with books and the activity of reading.

The diversity of childhoods

In the preceding sections of this chapter, I have considered the different elements which have contributed to the study. These areas are extensive in scope and I have used terms such as 'childhood', 'children's books' and 'readers' to describe them. However, these are general terms and their use can suggest a uniformity that does not exist in reality in children's lives or in their relationships to texts.

The recent focus on children's agency, as discussed previously, has enabled a more intricate analysis of the complexity of childhood experience. There has been a move away from a notion of a mono-identity for all childhoods. The sociology of childhood instead emphasises the diversity of children's experience (Buckingham, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005). These new interpretations of childhood emphasise that there is neither *one* child nor *one* experience of childhood and that those exploring childhood should take into account the diverse social and structural influences on children and young people and their families. Children's gender, race, class, sexuality, faith, culture and of course, age, as well as their individual perspectives on the world, ensure that children's lives and childhood cannot be neatly presented in simplistic ways. This presents challenges for researchers in reflecting what is different and common to the experience of childhood. It requires methodological and theoretical approaches which accept the diversity of childhoods as well as overt acknowledgement of what factors have been taken into account in a study. However, in spite of the principled position that childhood studies has taken on the multiplicity of childhoods, Morrow (2006) reflects that there has been little attention paid to childhood diversity except in the field of education research. In considering the parameters for this study, I had to decide which factors should be explored in depth while ensuring that there was not a bias to my methodological approaches (see Chapter 3 for further discussion).

Low income and poverty, for example, are known to impact on children's life chances and affect most domains of children's well being (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005). Hendrick (2003) points out that government policy constructs childhood in particular ways and that the existence of socially excluded families does not fit into the model of a modernised society. Those who are poor are therefore stigmatised and discriminated against. Recent research shows that children from low income households feel excluded from many areas including full participation in school and leisure activities (Ridge, 2006). This affects children and young people's ability to be autonomous across different aspects of childhood experiences. The influence of children's socio-economic status on their lives is complex and cannot be seen solely as about the income of households and their access to material goods. Its effects are more far reaching and profound. This has implications for the design of studies in terms of asking participants about their own personal circumstances and in ensuring that there is comparative evidence across social class.

Gender too has been a focus of policy interest and academic inquiry, commonly in the area of education where gender is regarded as a potent influence on achievement and participation in school (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007). More generally, the gendered experiences of boys and girls have been included, to some extent, in academic explorations of childhood. Cunningham (2006) highlights that childhood has been gendered across the centuries and children learn to be feminine and masculine in their identities as they grow up. Morrow (2006) suggests that children construct their gender identities drawing on a variety of influences and argues that great attention should be paid to gender issues in children's lives. Others who have written about gender, most notably Thorne (1993), also warn against attributing firm and fixed gendered positions to children and young people (Marsh and Millard, 2000; Younger et al, 2005). Francis (2006) states that that a gender focus on the underachievement of boys should not mask the impact of other factors such as class and poverty. Morrow emphasises that 'social differences do not operate in isolation' (2006:93) and that other aspects of children's lives such as class and ethnicity also influence childhood and children's gendered identities. Children and young people's gendered experience is subject to many influences including that of cultural

representations across media. So books can influence girls and boys in their understanding and experience of gender. Walkerdine (1990) and Pennell (2002) suggest that texts such as books and comics can contribute to the formation of gendered identities. Exploring gendered relationships to books is therefore a valid area of study.

Those charged with responsibility for learning regard it as highly important that boys and girls perform equally well in school. Up until the last decade, there was concern about whether girls were being overshadowed by the educational achievement of boys (Coles and Hall, 2002). This has shifted as girls have become more successful in school. Boys have now become the focus of educationalists and policy makers in terms of their educational performance and because of concerns about their lack of interest in school (Frosh et al, 2002; Younger et al, 2005). The debates of the previous decades about girls' underachievement in schools have been reversed, becoming a concern about the underperformance of boys in school instead (Coles and Hall, 2002; Millard, 1997; Younger et al, 2005). Frønes (2005), discussing educational achievements in Norway, says that boys' experiences are more polarised than girls; boys are among the most successful as well as the 'most marginalised' in the educational system. This is confirmed by an English study, undertaken for the UK government, which found that not all boys underachieve and that some boys found ways of performing well academically (Younger et al, 2005). A negative view of boys' attainment is therefore not consistent. However, and of relevance to this study, girls outperformed boys overall in an international literacy survey of 40 countries (Twist et al, 2007). The influence of gender on education and literacy is therefore notable.

Just as there is not one childhood, there is also more than one kind of child reader. Young people's reading identities are affected by age, gender, race and class as well as by their own personal interests and skills in reading. In considering how to approach this study, I considered which factors impacting on childhood would be prominent in the research design. Age, by virtue of choices about the research sample, is always a significant element in childhood research. The methodological implications of age are considered in more detailed in Chapter 3. I also took age

related influences on young people's reading into account. Research shows that young people's reading drops after primary school (Clark and Foster, 2005) with boys' reading falling off more abruptly than girls (Book Marketing, 2000; Hall and Coles, 1999). Mid teen young people are likely to read different kinds of texts, reading magazines rather than books (Book Marketing, 2000). These age related differences need to be acknowledged in research on young people and books.

Gender is of central importance to a study which explores young people's reading and engagement with texts. Research shows that the reading interests, abilities and practices of young people are highly gendered and they become more so when young people reach adolescence (Clark et al, 2006; Clark and Akerman, 2008; Sainsbury and Clarkson, 2008). Girls like reading more than boys with more boys having negative views of reading (Clark and Foster, 2005). Millard (1997) highlights that girls and boys have different experiences of school and therefore of reading and that they position themselves differently to books. Halls and Coles (1999) reinforce this view, stating that children's reading choices have always been gendered, adding that the dominance of fictional narratives in school does not always suit boys. This is also given more force by different standards in literacy attainment which shows that boys are achieving at lower levels than girls (Twist et al, 2003, Twist et al, 2007).

The emphasis on a particular age group and gender are not, of course, the only influences on children and young people's reading. Inequality and privilege play their part. Buckingham (2008), in his discussion of children and media, points out that young people do not all have the same access to intellectual, cultural and material resources. Kress (2003a) emphasises that literacy cannot be seen in isolation from other social, economic and technological factors while Barton and Hamilton (2000) highlight that written language reflects social practices. As Hilton suggests, young people's access to 'cultural goods' is not equal so children's experiences of 'different classes, communities and families of which literature practices are one facet, quickly point up where the child stands in relation to power, particularly power in language' (1996:13). These inequalities are apparent at an early stage of children's lives with children having less access to books if they live in lone parent families and if their mothers have few educational qualifications (Scottish

Government, 2008). There is much more to reading interest and success than a one to one encounter between a reader and book. Zipes emphasises the importance of social influences, stating that a consideration of children's books requires us to:

analyze the conditions under which children come into contact with material culture of all kinds and how their daily lives are circumscribed by family, school, and community relations.

(Zipes, 2001:33)

Watson believes that young people's reading is affected by concepts of literature which are 'composed of ideological and educational assumptions which have a great deal to do with power and privilege' (1992a:1). Children's engagement with books is therefore subject to a range of influences derived from different experiences of class, family and socio-economic circumstances.

Research shows that children's reading identities are complex and dynamic, undermining 'the myth of literacy as a neutral technology' (Hilton, 1996:12). It is not possible to consider the encounters between young people and books as an activity apart from the many social and structural influences on their lives. Having considered the existing research, I decided to focus on particular aspects of childhood experience. It was necessary to ensure that a wide range of participants took part and this is further discussed in Chapter 3. While recognising the importance of the impact of class and income, I decided not to focus on socio-economic status and inequality as this would have required asking young people about their individual family income and class status. I aimed instead to have a diverse range of participants through my choice of schools and to concentrate on the influence of age and gender on young people.

Relevant themes for the study

A number of gaps in existing research have emerged in the review. Although there is an extensive literature on both childhood and children's books, there is not a significant body of research on children and young people's views on children's books. Studies on children's books explore childhood, on the whole, from literary and theoretical perspectives. This approach gives a more prominent position to texts

rather than to the views of young people. By undertaking this empirical study, I aim to explore a gap in the existing literature on childhood and children's books.

Much of the research on children's reading interests considers children's experience within an educational context and is frequently related to curriculum needs around literacy. The intention of this study is not to explore young people's relationships to texts in the context of school based learning but to consider young people's views on childhood in children's books, taking account of their media experiences in and out of school. This research provides another perspective on young people's engagement with texts.

The interdisciplinary study of childhood has focused less on exploring children and young people's views on texts than on other areas of social science interest such as children and young people's use of services and their experience of families and relationships. There is increasingly a body of research on childhood and media such as television and popular culture but this is not currently mirrored by academic explorations of young people's relationships to books. This study aims to provide new insights by exploring young people's perspectives on fictional texts.

The study provides an opportunity to explore an under-researched area of children and young people's engagement with culture. It does this through a prism of contemporary understandings of childhood. It therefore aims to provide insights into young people's interests in texts, increase understanding of representations of childhood in one particular cultural medium and provide in-depth information on young people's reading habits.

The study will inform several areas which are of interest to academics, educational professionals, cultural bodies and children, parents and the wider public. It explores a medium which depicts fictional childhoods. The study therefore adds to an increasing body of knowledge on how childhood is constructed by considering one influential form of representation. It does this from the perspectives of young people, rather than through adults' more traditionally dominant viewpoints. The study

provides insights into young people's literacy, both in traditional texts and across other media.

The following themes which have emerged from this review will inform the research. In studying childhood, it is necessary to acknowledge the two overarching understandings which influence interactions with children and childhood; how children and young people are constructed as social agents as well as the historically more dominant understanding of children as human becomings. These different approaches will be used in this study to examine the relationships between children, childhood and children's books. I will consider the relevance of these constructs, exploring which approach or approaches are most theoretically helpful in developing an understanding of young people's engagement with representations of childhood.

A commitment to children as social agents indicates that young people are positioned actively rather than passively in relation to the different experiences and places of childhood. They are not simply the recipients of the representations of childhood but also have a role as constructors in finding and making their own meaning in cultural products including children's books. However, the positioning of young people as active players should not ignore the impact of other influences on their engagement with texts or result in simplistic assumptions about young people's capacities. The thesis will aim to acknowledge this complex interaction.

The gender and age of children and young people have a particular impact on childhood experience and are particularly relevant to engagement with children's books and other forms of culture. These areas will therefore be prominent as themes in exploring the research questions and in analysis of the data. These research choices should not be seen as a diminution of the importance of other areas of childhood experience which would also benefit from detailed study.

Constructs of childhood are generally defined by adults. This is a relational concept with childhood viewed as 'other' to that of adulthood. This reflects the structural inequalities that exist between adults and children with adults as the producers, mediators and regulators of different products and services associated with

childhood. Children's books too reflect this generational relationship and this positioning of children to adults will be referred to throughout the study.

The next chapter considers the methodological approaches that were used in the study.

Chapter 3 Methodology

...if you want to know what children think about things and about their experiences *as* children, why not ask children themselves?

(James, 2004:7)

One of the central themes of this study is how children and young people find their own spaces in an adult regulated and constructed environment. Research provides one way of seeking out and investigating these childhood spaces, offering an opportunity to explore facets of children's lives through child centred research approaches.

The study aims to do this by taking several different factors into account. Firstly, the research is underpinned by sociological theories of childhood which promote the importance of the agency of children and young people and, as a consequence, assert the principle of seeking out the views of children in order to better understand childhood. Secondly, a commitment to understanding childhood through research translates into a purposeful engagement with children and young people as experts on their own lives, requiring the use of methods that maximise their participation. Thirdly, the research explores young people's views on books, a cultural product for, but not produced by, children and young people. Young people's experiences as readers will influence their responses to fictional texts as well as their participation in research on children's books. All have implications for the methodological approaches used in the study.

This chapter examines how participants were identified, the research approaches that were chosen and ethical approaches that are relevant to research with young people. It identifies particular elements which influenced the study including undertaking the research in schools and the role of the adult researcher. It concludes with how the data was analysed.

Identifying participants

Allied to the concepts of social agency described in the sociology of childhood, the literature on research with children highlights the position of children and young people as research participants rather than subjects or objects (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Christensen and James, 2000a; Greene and Hill, 2005; James et al, 1998; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000; Mayall, 2002). This positioning asserts children's competences as experts on their own lives and moves away from using traditionally embedded notions of the socially developing child in research (James et al, 1998). As a result, research methods are required which support and endorse young people's expertise rather than viewing them as being unable to contribute because of their age and their status as children. How researchers understand childhood will affect the research they undertake (Harden et al, 2000).

Identifying children and young people as research participants raises particular challenges, implying a participative ethos that may not, in reality, be reflected in the research. As Hallowell et al (2005) state, the terms research 'object', 'subject' and 'participant' have different meanings and suggest differing degrees of involvement. Supporters of participatory research argue that there are major differences between research which aims to deconstruct traditional power relationships and that which is controlled by researchers but seeks out children's views (Coad and Lewis, 2004). Although these approaches reflect different points on a continuum, the use of the term 'participant' has become a common term for children and young people taking part in research. As the study was underpinned by a commitment to seeking young people's views, it was important to ensure that young people's agency was respected and that approaches maximised their participation. The following sections explore the implications of this commitment for the study.

Embarking on a study which explores the relationship between young people, childhood and children's books requires careful consideration about what might impact on its design. Decisions about the nature of a research project have consequences about the methodology that is used (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Similarly, identifying the sample of participants is significant for the parameters of a

study and requires early decisions about the focus of the research. The aim was to explore young people's views on childhood in children's books, implying that most of the participants should be reading books for children and young people rather than those for an adult audience. I wanted to involve readers who chose the texts they read, at least to some extent, and were reading fictional books independently. These different components suggested that an older rather than younger age group of readers would be most consistently appropriate. I decided to recruit young people aged 10 to 14 years of age, focusing on the upper and lower end of the age range with most participants aged 10 and 11 years old and 13 and 14 years old. A very small number of the young people in the two school year groups, primary 6 in Scottish primary schools and S2, second year of secondary schools, were just below or just over the age range but were included in the sample.

The age of participants raises specific issues in research with children and young people. There are contradictions inherent in identifying appropriate age groups for study if research is based on a view of children as social agents rather than human beings. As James et al (1998) point out, researchers choose young people from age groups that they think can contribute effectively to their research. This implies that some children and young people are able to take part because they are seen to have competencies associated with increased age. This reveals an uncertain commitment to children's agency. Age should not be regarded as a significant way of determining the experience of young people (Christensen and James, 2000b). Considering the views of young people at different ends of a four year age range in this study helped to explore whether there were significant differences which could be attributed to the age of participants. It also enabled, conversely, a less rigid age based approach to be taken as the larger age range of the sample allowed for young people to have reading habits and interests not strictly delineated by age. My aim as a researcher was to think more reflexively about age and its impact on the research (James et al, 1998; Harden et al, 2000; Morrow and Richards, 1996). It was noteworthy, for example, that many of the young people were reading the same books although they were separated by an age difference of up to four years.

Research indicates that attitudes to, and support of, reading within school will have an impact on children's attitudes to books (Chambers, 1993; Kirsch et al, 2002). This suggests that young people were more likely to take part in the research if their interest in reading was fostered by the school environment. In turn, schools with a strong commitment to supporting young people's reading would be more likely to facilitate access to young people and be interested in the research findings. I therefore approached the school library service in one authority in order to build on its particular interest in books and reading. The support of this service in five out of the six participating schools made access straightforward with school librarians seeking support from teaching staff. It also meant that young people with a variety of reading interests could be invited to participate, including young people who were particularly interested in books and were members of school book groups.

The research was carried out in two local authority areas in Scotland with five schools in one authority and the sixth in a neighbouring one. A total of three primary schools and three secondary schools took part. Four of the six schools were in areas identified as being deprived by their local authority. A total of 158 young people participated in the questionnaire survey with 48 per cent boys and 52 per cent girls (see Table. 1). The majority, 65.2 per cent were from the older age group and 34.8 per cent were from the younger age group. The higher number in the older age group reflects the participation of several year groups or classes from the secondary schools.

Forty three young people took part in the interviews for the study with 58 per cent girls and 42 per cent boys (see Table 2). In this sample, 44 per cent of those who took part in interviews were from the younger age group aged 10 and 11 years with the remaining 56 per cent from the older group, 13 and 14 years of age. The age of those interviewed was more evenly distributed. All young people who took part in the interviews also completed the questionnaire.

Table 1 Number and age of young people who took part in questionnaire survey

Age	Number	Percentage
Younger students	55	34.8
Older students	103	65.2
Total	158	100.0

Table 2 Number and age of young people who took part in interviews

Age	Number	Percentage
Younger students	19	44.0
Older students	24	56.0
Total	43	100.0

A number of factors had to be taken into account which could affect young people's participation in this study. Firstly, research shows that readers are not the same. They bring multiple identities and experiences to bear on reading including their own attitude to books and their attitudes to race, class, age and sex (Hunt, 1991; Malu, 2003). The age and gender of young people is likely to have an impact on their reading interests (Clark et al, 2005; Clark and Akerman, 2008; Coles and Hall, 2002; Millard, 1997). Although children's literacy is known to grow during the period of middle childhood, the level of independent reading begins to drop as they move into adolescence. This is even more noticeable among boys (Hall and Coles, 1999; Clark and Foster, 2005). Some young people are not confident readers or have additional learning needs which impact on their reading experiences. The socio-economic status of young people's families has a number of negative impacts on young people's reading (Clark and Foster, 2005). Although the literature on research with children and young people asserts their right to be regarded as experts on their own lives (James et al, 1998), carrying out a research project on reading may fail to do this if young people do not feel expert as readers. Empowering young people is more than a rhetorical commitment in research. It also depends on approaches which acknowledge differences among young people. It was important, therefore, to consider positive and negative factors which might influence young people's participation.

Research methods

There is a growing literature on research with children and young people (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Christensen and James, 2000c; Fraser et al, 2004; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Greig and Taylor, 2007; Hill, 2006; Mayall, 2002). It considers what is particular about research with children and young people and emphasises the importance of researchers being proactive in using methodologies which ensure that young people are able to contribute their views effectively. There is some debate about the best and most appropriate methods to use with children and young people (Christenson and James, 2000c; Eder and Fingerson, 2002). Hill (2006) highlights that children like research methods which are more immediately pleasurable.

Participative research methods such as photography and drawings, and group activities and games are regarded as fun and engaging although Harden et al (2000) suggest that they are more helpful if they are used occasionally rather than solely as evidence. Adults should not underestimate the capacity of children to contribute to research through more traditional approaches such as interviews and questionnaires (Christensen and James, 2000a). Punch (2002a) reports that young people in her study enjoyed questions as much as other techniques although young people also liked different methods. These perspectives were taken into account in deciding on the appropriate methods to use.

Using qualitative and quantitative approaches generated a variety of data, maximised limited resources more effectively and ensured a two stage approach to gathering the research evidence. Different methods also help to ensure the reliability of data (Fontana and Frey, 2000). One of the aims of the questionnaire was to gather data on young people's reading so I was better informed about their reading interests prior to interviews. A smaller number were then invited to participate in interviews. The research questions and the linked research methods are outlined in Table 3.

The research was undertaken in two stages in order to pilot and then reflect on the research process before undertaking a second phase with a larger sample. This helped in refining the research questions and clarifying the sample size, methodology and age range. Those who took part in the pilot were in the younger age range, 10

and 11 years old. The assumption was that the approaches would be accessible for the older age group if they were suitable for younger participants. Due to the interest of the students, this early pilot became a substantial part of the research and contributed all of the interviews for the younger age group. The interview structure was not significantly amended.

Table 3 Research questions and methods

Questions	Research method
Overarching question	
What do young people think about the ways in which children's books represent childhood?'	
Are different constructs of childhood embedded in young people's reading experiences?	Questionnaire/Interviews
What are young people's reflections on the relationship between books and 'real life'?	Interviews
Do the depictions of child characters provide alternative representations of childhood that are not dominant in society?	Interviews
Are young people the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them?	Questionnaire/Interviews

No assumptions were made about the reading abilities of the young people who took part. Young people were asked to draw on their own experience of reading fictional books rather than focusing on particular books or discussing texts that were already part of the class curriculum. It was not the intention to replicate classroom practices of discussing specific texts. This was particularly important where young people declared that they did not like reading, leading, for example, to one young person to talk about *The Simpsons* comic, a text she was comfortable reading, and another to talk about his great reading passion, car magazines. As the questionnaire results show (see Chapter 4), young people had varied reading interests, reading fictional books as well as comics, magazines and the internet.

Other experiences of engaging young people in discussing books were insightful in developing the research methodology. Chambers (1993) urges the use of skills which

facilitate children to talk about books, 'booktalk', and encourages approaches which enable adults and children to share understanding of a text. Fry took a case study approach to his research with young people on reading and culture, emphasising the conversational nature of the interviews, which allowed for more possibilities of 'unexpected insights and changes in direction' (1985:1). Both suggested useful discursive ways of engaging with children on books. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) found that the ephemerality of popular culture has an impact on research. As a consequence, researching what is 'cool' to children and young people may be difficult to capture within a researcher's timeframe (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002). What is fashionable may be so transient that young people may be reluctant to expose themselves to ridicule as they may not wish to proclaim interest in something that is not current and popular. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh therefore raise an ethical issue about researching children's views on popular culture as access to material goods is 'often a reason or an excuse for children to exclude one another from a social group' (2002:32). For a girl to not like books by the author Jacqueline Wilson, for example, may be seen to be out of step with other girls. However, it may also be the case that children's books do not have the same level of peer influence as other forms of children's culture such as music, computer games or television programmes. This study found that there were a host of influences on young people's reading (see Chapter 4).

Questionnaire

The aim of the questionnaire was to introduce the research project as well as explore participants' reading habits. It also enabled the collection of a wider range of data than would have been possible in the 20 to 45 minute slots that were normally available for each interview and ensured that a larger number of young people took part in the research. The questionnaire structure and content was influenced by other surveys and research undertaken with children and young people. These included large scale surveys on young people's reading interests and habits (Clark and Foster, 2005; Hall and Coles, 1999; Hancock, 2001). An internet based survey for Cool Reads (Cool Reads, 2002), a website set up by young people, was useful in guiding the categories of different kinds of books that were used in the questionnaire as well

as questions on the influences on young people's reading. It also provided examples of questions and words which would be accessible to young people. Burton (2000) emphasises that it is helpful to use words in a questionnaire that are familiar to participants while de Vaus (2002) suggests that the researcher checks that the words used in questionnaires mean the same for all respondents.

The questionnaire was designed to be easily accessible with tick boxes for most questions as well as open boxes for providing additional information (see Appendix A). These open options were used by some but not all of the young people. Young people who used this option added their specialist interests. Their responses also highlighted areas which the other answer options did not cover. As Scott (2000) notes, pre-testing questionnaires is essential so the draft was tested by a school class in the younger age group and their comments were incorporated in the final version. The process for administration of the questionnaire depended on the different needs of the schools, influenced by factors such as class timetables and the time of the year when the research was undertaken. After an initial visit to introduce the research, the questionnaire was given out to young people on the second visit. The visits allowed young people to ask questions and make comments as well as emphasising their right to give and withdraw consent. This would have been more difficult if the questionnaire had been administered in my absence by a teacher or librarian when it would have been more likely to be viewed as a routine school task. Deciding to administer the questionnaire in person backs up Hopper's (2005) view that there are problems around reliability in questionnaires in the school setting as students can write what they think the teacher wants to read. Hill (2006) reports that young people suggested that questionnaires should be administered by people from outside so any possible censorship or influence by teachers could be avoided.

The majority of questionnaires were correctly completed. Young people who were known by teachers to have literacy difficulties were supported in completing questionnaires by classroom assistants or by teachers. The small numbers not completed may have been due to young people losing interest or being reluctant to answer questions. These responses were interpreted as young people withdrawing their consent, consciously or unconsciously. In one instance, a boy aged 10 years

wrote 'No' in large letters over much of his form. His teacher told him off, apologising for the young person's lack of 'courtesy' and asked him to complete the questionnaire again. I indicated that this was not necessary but, as happened on a number of occasions, the teacher was keen to ensure that students responded in a way that reflected the school culture and norms of classroom behaviour. On another occasion, an older young man of 14 years, disciplined for his behaviour by his teacher during the research sessions, put crosses by the majority of his answers. His responses to open questions showed that he was intentionally subverting the norm of what was expected. What made him want to read a book was 'night TV', the response to the 'someone else who he might talk to about books was 'hell no' and things he had in his bedroom were a 'rope', 'a nife' (sic) and a 'gun'. Again, the teacher was apologetic and wanted the young person to fill in the form again although this did not happen because of the overt reluctance of the young man. Curtis et al (2004) suggest that adult gatekeepers can encourage young people who are marginalised to take part in research in a way which makes their refusal difficult. So although I aimed to support young people's participation in the study, this could be undermined by a dominant culture of compliance within schools. This general point is explored later in this chapter.

The questionnaire was generally effective in eliciting information from the young people. There were a number of areas where other options could have been added as answers to the questions to provide more in-depth information. For example, the question about what young people liked reading could have included reading material such as newspapers and fiction usually identified as being for adult audiences. By not acknowledging this group of texts I was undermining an objective of the questionnaire which was to emphasise to participants that all kinds of texts were acceptable as a reflection of their reading interests. Not including these options also suggests an age based bias to the questionnaire, separating young people's reading interests from those of adults. This does not match my aim, highlighted earlier in this chapter, to think (and therefore act) more reflexively about the impact of age on research. It also reinforces a traditional approach of seeing children's interests as different to those of adults (Mayall, 2002). Other examples of options

which could have been included in questions are noted in Chapter 4 which analyses the questionnaire's findings.

In order to find out more about young people's reading habits, the questionnaire included questions on how much young people were reading and if they read out of school. By asking questions about how much young people read, where they read and if they enjoyed reading in different ways, I intended to get a wide picture of their reading interests as well as check the reliability and validity of their answers. I considered whether the options for young people's answers on how much they read should include defined periods of time or allow young people to select the categories which best met their reading habits, 'read lots', 'read a bit', 'don't like reading' and 'find reading difficult'. In line with the ethos of the study, I wanted to explore young people's own perceptions of their reading interests rather than provide prescriptive examples. I also looked at other studies to see what approaches had been used in other surveys of young people's reading. Hall and Coles (1999) and Clark and Foster (2005) both used a number of self defining categories to measure reading interests and habits.

On reflection, using periods of time such as time spent reading over a day, week or month that young people spent reading would have provided additional detailed data. Foddy (1993) suggests that it is a flawed approach to believe that all respondents use the same framework to answer a research question and that defining the kind of answers that should be given is more productive. In this study I decided not to give young people the options of periods of time spent reading for a number of reasons. Defining a quantity of time spent reading is not necessarily an accurate reflection of young people's reading habits and interests. Measuring reading by time spent in the activity is limited in what it reveals. Some young people read more slowly while others might read for shorter periods but read more intensely. Livingstone's (2002) research on new media, for example, found that younger children usually read for short periods of time while older young people read for longer blocks of time on the occasions they did read. It is also difficult for participants to estimate the period of time spent reading unless they keep a diary as reading is often a fragmented activity which takes place at different times during the day. This does not necessarily provide

detailed information. Saris and Galhofer (2007) point out that using a diary involves considerable amounts of work for participants and that, as a consequence, the amount of information they give reduces as the research progresses.

Reading is also undertaken for pleasure as well as for school work and young people might give different weight to their reading according to these different objectives. As reading is seen to be, at least partially, an educational activity, giving a particular time value might imply that reading for greater periods of time is a more acceptable answer. Some questionnaire options can appear more socially desirable than others with respondents wanting to make a positive impression on the interviewer (Saris and Galhofer, 2007). Finding out about how much young people read is not a neutral question due to the importance that is attached to reading by adults. There are therefore a number of ways to posing questionnaire questions on how much young people read.

The questionnaire was successful in eliciting a large amount of data, some of which is not closely analysed in this thesis due to the focus of the study and a lack of space to discuss the findings. Although the range of this data is interesting, it would have been useful to explore some of the questions in the survey in more depth while omitting the final two questions which have not been considered in detail in this thesis. More detailed quantitative data would have been generated by focusing on specific areas such as the relationship between reading in and out of school and the diversity of young people's reading interests.

Interviews

This research starts from the premise that young people, like other research participants, are 'competent narrators of their lives' (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995: 29). As interviews are a place of interaction (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), it suggests that they are an effective method to use with young people, providing an opportunity for communication and exchange. However, Atkinson and Silverman (1997) warn against a glib use of the interview, seeing it as a romanticised portrayal of self which in turn gives 'a spurious sense of stability, authenticity and security' (1997, 309-10). To counter this, the researcher should not use interviews uncritically

(Atkinson and Silverman, 1997). Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that research is an extended conversation. Using the term ‘conversation’ to describe an informal interview approach, Mayall (2000) emphasises the helpfulness of the ‘research conversation’ which enables young people to have greater control. Young people can then ‘firm up knowledge’ and understand more about their own social worlds (Mayall, 2000: 133). Riessman points out that moving away from a fixed format for an interview ‘encourages greater equality (and uncertainty) in the conversation’ (2008:24), changing the dynamic with more possibilities for ‘power-sharing’ although she also warns that this does not result in equality. Rapley states that interviews are:

social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) *accounts* or *versions* of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts.
(Rapley, 2004: 16)

These different factors suggest that interviews are a valid method to use with young people, potentially creating a conversational interactive space which allows, at least, for some control by young people. But Curtis et al state that not all children and young people are comfortable with ‘the discursive nature of conventional interview-based research’ (2004: 168) and this method can exclude some young people. I chose interviews as one of the research methods while recognising that additional strategies might be needed to encourage participation.

After considering the possible benefits of using larger group interviews for the qualitative research, I decided that they would not provide the more discursive environment of interviews with one or two young people. Group interviews would require a different kind of approach, akin to a book group, with young people agreeing to discuss common texts rather than providing space for the discussion of individual book choices and interests. Interviews in groups are not without problems. It can be difficult to raise sensitive areas and the group setting can affect how individuals express themselves and encourage a collective response to questions (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Greene and Hill (2005) point out that children may not like sharing personal details in a group. A young person who feels uncomfortable

speaking in front of others can be interviewed on a one to one basis. Interviews with one or two young people also have the potential of generating more data than group discussions. Although a traditional method for research, interviews can provide a certain degree of flexibility which can attempt to meet children and young people's individual needs.

Interviewing is also commonplace in contemporary society and is the 'experiential conduit par excellence of the electronic age' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002: 9). Young people have generally used interview techniques in the classroom as well as being knowledgeable about their use in different media. They are therefore accustomed to interview conventions. Young people's wide media and educational experiences across these areas can be underestimated by adults. My own experience is that most young people are undaunted by interviews as a research technique. What can make interviews less effective are elements of the process rather than the simple choice of the interview as a research method. There are, after all, many possible influences on an interview (Rapley, 2004). Holstein and Gubrium (2004) affirm the complexity of the interview as event suggesting that:

Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondent replies: it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter.
(Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 141)

Young people were invited to take part in the interviews after completing the questionnaire. In two of the schools, an entire class and a book group volunteered. In others, young people affirmed their willingness to take part or were nominated by teachers and librarians and then invited to participate by myself. Young people were offered the choice of being interviewed by themselves or with a friend. This choice was given in order to generate a more interactive and discursive response to research questions and to encourage a more relaxed atmosphere, taking into account Mayall's (2000) experience that young people found it supportive to be interviewed with a friend or peer. Interviewing young people in pairs did appear to lend itself to the conversation approach (Mayall, 2002; Rubin and Rubin, 2005). It enabled young

people to prompt and spark each other off. This is illustrated by Adam and Charlie in their discussion about *The Falcon's Malteser* by Anthony Horowitz (2002):

Adam: Yeah, because we're reading *The Falcon's Malteser* in the classroom and I think it's quite good because you know how the detectives would usually be like men. The detectives are two 13 year old boys, I think...

Charlie: Well one of them's a bit older. One of them's 13, I think...

Adam: and they're Tim Diamond and...

Charlie: Nick Diamond...

Adam: Nick Diamond but Tim, I think... Is it Tim that gets called Herbert?'

Charlie: Aye

Adam: ...and there's been someone called the Fat Man and Tim Diamond picked up the gun and he had it in his hand and the police barged in the door and they arrested him for murder and then it happened again...

Charlie: ...but this time in their office.

(Adam and Charlie aged 11 years)

On the other hand, interviewing young people in pairs could also lead to a situation where young people censored their own responses in order to accommodate what might be acceptable to a peer. In one interview with two girls, a third, who had previously been interviewed, sat in and waited for her friends. Although the girls liked talking about books, the interview was overwhelmed by the participants' giggles and jokes and it became difficult for anyone to contribute more serious views in a light hearted atmosphere. All the paired interviews were single sex which was due to young people's choices rather than by design. A smaller number of young people opted to be interviewed individually, including one boy who was keen to talk about books and wanted to be interviewed alone. In some instances the unavailability of other young people dictated that they consented to be interviewed by themselves.

The interviews were semi structured. A core set of questions were used as a guide and a prompt for the interviews (see Appendix B). Young people frequently used narrative techniques to illustrate their answers. This is in line with Mishler's (1986) view that research participants' accounts have a similarity to stories and have narrative elements. He suggests that stories are likely to emerge in interviews which are less structured and where participants are:

invited to speak in their own voices, allowed to control the introduction and flow of topics, and encouraged to extend their responses.

(Mishler, 186:69)

This use of narrative elements was given an added impetus in this research as young people retold stories from books they had read. Here Rhona responds to a question about what she thought was realistic in a book, *The Star of Kazan* by Ibbotson (2004):

Like, em, in *The Star of Kazan*, she, the girl in it, gets adopted. And then she wants to find out who her real mother is...she dreams about her mother coming to get her. And then, when she gets to about the age of eight, I think it is, her mother comes to collect her and she comes in a carriage that she's imagined her in and in the clothes and stuff. So it's pretty much what she's imagined it to be like.

(Rhona aged 13 years)

Interview questions were adapted to meet the needs of individual young people. This included those who were reluctant readers or had a specific reading interest. Rapley (2004) suggests that interview questions can 'mutate' depending on the person being interviewed. A conversational approach to the interviews helped in expanding and developing areas of discussion. Some of the topics were particularly complex such as asking young people to reflect on the relationship between books and 'real life' (see Chapter 5). In instances where a small number of young people found the concept difficult, I used examples of books, films or television programmes that could be categorised as 'realistic' to facilitate the discussion. This included *The Story of Tracy Beaker* by Jacqueline Wilson (1992), a book, also adapted as a television serial, which is generally viewed as having these elements. Discussing this text encouraged young people to comment on whether they thought that the story represented fictional experiences of childhood effectively. Not all young people, however, agreed with a description of the text as 'realistic with one young person seeing a mismatch between the text and her own experience. Her 'knowledge' did not match 'reality', a conceptual pairing that Berger and Luckmann (1967) highlight in their examination of the social construction of reality.

On reflection, this question was challenging. It also highlights the difficulty of a researcher and participant having a shared understanding of the language and concepts that are used in the research encounter. This can lead to an unequal experience with young people not always having had the opportunity to draw on the same degree of preparation, knowledge and experience as adults. As one girl straightforwardly said in answer to a question about characters in books, ‘They just are. I’ve no got a clue...scooby. That’s a kind of difficult question’ (Leanne aged 13 years). Generally young people were able to respond to the question and this is explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

The two methods, interviews and questionnaire survey, generated a range of data appropriate for exploring the research questions. Young people were generally keen to participate in the study although it was easier for young people to give and withhold consent to participate in interviews than in questionnaire surveys which generally involved large formal classroom groups. I would adapt the research methods in future study, recruiting young people at an earlier stage to help design and plan the study with the objective of securing greater involvement by young people. This would help in structuring interview and survey areas of inquiry and research questions.

Ethical approaches to research with young people

The premise underpinning research with children and young people is that it has a solid ethical basis with informed consent, consistent research standards and respect for young people at the heart of its practice (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Christensen, 2004; Christensen and James, 2000a; David et al, 2001; Farrell, 2005; Hill, 2006; Morrow and Richards, 1996). The attention to consent and other ethical areas such as protection from harm and the right to privacy is not the sole concern of research with children. It also applies to research with adults (Silverman, 2006; Fontana and Frey, 2000) although the role of adult gatekeepers is significant in research with children (Punch, 2002b). Research constructed in an ethical way recognises children and young people’s agency and their right to be seen as participants. Some research is able to take this further and enables children to be co-

researchers or full participants (Alderson, 2000). The consequence of accepting this principle of greater participation is that researchers need to ensure, at the very least, that the research design is not exploitative of children, that the methods are appropriate and that the research is based on a solid understanding of children's rights.

Children and young people should be able to decide if they want to take part in research, based on their access to high quality information and an awareness that they can withdraw at any point of the process (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; David et al, 2001; Edwards and Alldred, 1999). As an iterative process, this requires the researcher to find out if young people actually want to take part and for parents and carers of children to give their informed consent. Before undertaking the research with each group of participants, I visited each class to provide information, acknowledging that there are particular issues about securing consent in schools (David et al, 2001; Devine, 2002). The participation of young people in the school environment is predicated on an expectation that they will do what is requested of them by adults who, in turn, will use their 'authoritative resources to socialize children in line with adult-defined goals and expectations' (Devine, 2002: 308). Although a researcher can emphasise that children can choose not to take part in the research, this creates dilemmas for the teacher. Non participation does not fit into the ethos of the classroom. It leads to practical difficulties and teachers can see a refusal as impolite or discourteous to an external visitor. This was a constant backdrop to my own experience of undertaking research in schools.

Information about research with young people is often transmitted initially through teachers or other adults ('there's a visitor coming to see you who is doing a project on...'). If there has not been the opportunity to discuss underpinning principles of the research with the relevant school staff, there can be different accounts given about the role of the research participants and the opportunity for individual choice and decision making. Curtis et al (2004), in their article on researching the views of hard to reach young people, discuss the impact of adult gatekeepers on encouraging participation, with inclusion viewed as a 'reward' and exclusion as a 'punishment'. For young people who are in conflict with school, refusing to take part can be

interpreted as another instance of disobedience. If the 'process of invitation' is left to gatekeepers, researchers are avoiding the responsibility for ensuring young people's full informed consent (Curtis et al, 2004).

Young people were alert to the contradictions around informed consent in this study. In one school, a librarian was extolling the merits of taking part to a young person. 'How often', she cajoled, 'do you get a chance to have your voice heard'. 'How often' replied the young person 'do I get the choice of saying no'. Young people generally can subvert the traditional order of the classroom in order to indicate their refusal to take part. They can scribble on the questionnaire, not tick the questionnaire boxes, be disengaged in an interview or up-end a focus group, giving the appearance of consent but in fact creating their response to the research encounter, often unobserved by the teacher. These young people are withdrawing their consent but in a way that does not confront the power dynamics of the classroom or require them to say 'no' verbally and openly. As a researcher I was complicit in this model of adult-child relations in a school, recording my perception in field notes that I was seen as a teacher figure, particularly when talking to a whole class.

Schools were visited in advance of the fieldwork and letters were given out to parents and carers as well as to each participating child (Appendices C and D). An information sheet was provided for the school and class teachers, outlining what the research was about, what the sessions would entail and contact details. These were adapted depending on the school's level of involvement in the research. Two schools, for example, took part in the questionnaire but not the interview component of the research. An initial idea to produce a separate leaflet was abandoned when young people's response in the pilot phase suggested that too many pieces of paper did not ensure informed consent and were not necessarily absorbed by young people. The 'paper heavy approach' was viewed as ineffective by teachers and librarians, the gatekeepers to the research participants, who informed me that young people got lots of paper communications during the school day, a number of which had to be taken home and were often 'binned' en route. One teacher commented that forms were just routinely signed rather than scrutinised. Another teacher stated that getting forms returned to school was 'hard work' and indicated that she had to 'chase' forms to get

them back for the study. My perception was that the process of gaining consent from parents and carers was slightly different in each school and relied heavily on the individual approach of the school to communication with parents. Challenges associated with this part of the consent process are underestimated in research accounts. It raises a question about whether providing more intricate written detail on the research project and the 'do's and don'ts' of ethics such as anonymity and child protection procedures actually results in more informed consent.

Young people were told that they could withdraw their consent to participate at any point during the research. They were informed that their contributions were anonymous and they would not be personally identified in the research. The exception to this commitment related explicitly to child protection where young people were told that I would have to speak to another adult if they intimated that they or any other young person was unsafe. I was checked with Disclosure Scotland in line with requirements for all those who have contact with children and young people in services in Scotland. I fed back to research participants although this was not always possible due to school holidays and young people moving from one school year to another.

Undertaking research in schools

Schools have a number of advantages as a research location. They offer access to a wide range of children and young people who are gathered in one place and it is easy to identify specific age groups. They also reflect common and diverse characteristics in their populations, providing a snapshot of socio-economic groups, geographical neighbourhoods and of communities of interest. There was no obvious alternative research location which would be empathetic to the discussion of books but which would also include young people who were not necessarily avid readers. Local libraries, for example, were discounted because of the limitations on recruiting a wide range of participants. Findings from the questionnaire in this study identified that 41 per cent of young people in this sample borrowed books from libraries with the younger age group more likely to use this resource, indicating that libraries are not necessarily well used by young people. In this instance, the focus of the research lent

itself to the school environment where discussing books was seen as a routine activity.

Using schools also raises a number of issues about the appropriateness of the research setting (David et al, 2001). This was not, after all, a study about reading in schools but one about young people's engagement with books. This can take place in and out of schools. As this research found, some young people did not read out of school or were reluctant to read books associated with school. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002), discussing the researching of popular culture, suggest that research does not always take place in the setting where the activity happens. Carrying out research on books in schools in this instant might suggest an educational association to young people (David et al, 2001). This might deter young people from fully contributing to the research as they might not find it easy to discuss their wider reading interests and instead stick to what they saw as being 'acceptable' in a classroom context. Young people who were having difficulties in school might not feel comfortable talking about books. Participants may also be influenced by their class mates (Scott, 2000).

These are particular issues if schools are seen as places of power where young people have little control. Schools have conventions and structures which can influence the research process (Hill, 2006; Mayall 2000). As James et al highlight, the school is a manifestation of the adult structuring of children's lives where adult-child relations are 'mediated relationships focusing on tasks' (1998:189). Researchers request young people's engagement in ways that replicate the focus of other adults in the classroom. They are, for example, purposeful and structured with objectives for their session as are teachers. On the other hand, researchers want to emphasise that young people have the right to make individual decisions about taking part in their studies. In David et al's (2001) reflections on children and school based research, the authors draw attention to the unconsciously used traditional 'classroom practices' of making children listen while they were told about the project, therefore encouraging children's compliance by falling into the mores of educational practice. These practices make it harder to secure children's informed consent.

Highlighting these areas is not to undermine the dominant model of child-adult, student-teacher relationships in schools but reflect a realistic understanding of how the school community is constructed. Where research is carried out with children and young people is not ‘context free’ (David et al, 2001) but subject to the influences of the surrounding environment. In one of the research sessions in this study, young people, who were aged 10 and 11 years old, conformed to the usual rules that governed their behaviour in the classroom. They sat on the classroom ‘listening’ mat when I was talking to them. They moved automatically and without instruction to the tables when they filled in the questionnaire. They put up their hands when they wanted to talk to me. They sat on back on the mat for the conclusion of the session, filling out a questionnaire one minute and feeding back on homework on the whiteboard in the next. This experience was replicated in other research settings, particularly with the younger participants. It suggests that young people might participate in the way that is expected of them in a school setting rather than how they want to participate, again raising issues about their informed consent.

The ‘implacable routines of institutional life’ (Walkerdine, 1996: 41) determine the parameters of the research activity. The dominance of the school timetable is paramount, defining what can be done and what happens in a research session. Timetables, according to Devine and drawing on Giddens’ work, establish ‘boundaries on the nature and extent of children’s activity’ classifying time for play and work, dividing ‘children’s space into regions’ (Devine, 2002: 309). Placing research in the ‘work zone’ therefore gives it particular meaning and a relationship to the authoritative nature of the school day. The contradictions in working within these boundaries whilst aiming to ensure the active participation of young people are palpable. In my experience, this included the restlessness of the pre-lunch period, the class of 14 year olds at 8.45am who were scarcely awake, the end of term timetables of school rehearsals and trips and the girls who were disappointed when they had to do their assessment tests instead of interviews. In the secondary schools, most of the research sessions took place in school libraries which were more informal than classrooms although these spaces too had rules which impacted on young people’s interactions. In two schools, book groups which met regularly participated in the

research during the lunchtime break. Participating in the research was therefore a chosen activity. These groups were keen contributors and gave some of the liveliest interviews, suggesting that actively choosing to take part and personal interest were helpful in supporting young people's participation.

Hill (2006) suggests that there are five different levels of engagement that children and young people may have in research activities:

Engaged – enthusiastic about taking part;
Open – willing to take part;
Self protective – reluctant to contribute personal material;
Detached – reluctant to contribute personal material;
Subversive – willing to break the 'rules' (e.g. by providing false or joking responses).

(Hill, 2006:75)

The majority of young people who took part in the study appeared to be generally 'engaged' and 'open' in their participation. There were a small number of participants whose responses and levels of engagement suggested that they were 'self protective', 'detached' and 'subversive'. The interest of participants was much easier to assess in the interviews than in the questionnaire component of the study which involved large groups of young people and was a less interactive encounter. It was also, on reflection, more difficult for young people to refuse consent to take part in the questionnaire element of the research as these often became whole class exercises. This suggests that questionnaires could be administered in different ways to ensure that young people freely gave their consent.

There could be a number of reasons for the apparent interest of most young people. Pragmatically, my presence disrupted classroom routines. Being involved in such diversionary activities is therefore, at least for some young people, a welcome interruption ('it's better than maths'). For the teacher, it can provide a break from his or her normal role ('I'll just get on with some marking'). However, it is easy to come to an unsubstantiated personal judgement on how engaged children were in the research and their level of enjoyment. My research might not have garnered the same degree of interest if the research session had been pitted against a trip out or another break in timetabled routine. As there were no evaluative activities which would have

enabled young people to feedback their views on the research process, my impression is based on the liveliness of the interviews and the data that was produced. Hill (2006) suggests that there are few accounts of children and young people's views of research methods. The lack of a process for young people to provide me with their views on participating in the research is an omission. I would build in evaluation processes in future research as a matter of course.

Role of the adult researcher

Researchers are now more conscious of the inequalities that arise from being young and what that means for young people (Mayall, 2002). The effect that adult power has on the relationship between the researcher and research participant is under greater scrutiny in terms of its impact on the research process. The researcher has a particular role as an adult professional, a duty and responsibility to ensure that the research does no harm and follows ethically high standards of practice.

Understanding these different contributory elements is becoming the norm in research with children and young people, fostered in part by greater debates on research ethics in universities and amongst agencies that carry out research with children (Alderson and Morrow, 2004; Christensen and James, 2000c; Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society, 2005). The aim in this research was to ensure that the young people were involved as participants. However, young people were not involved as co-participants in the design, implementation or analysis of the study, reducing its capacity to be truly participative. As a researcher I aimed to recognise children's right to be given the enhanced status that goes with the term 'participants' and to ensure their informed consent, respect for their views and an ethical underpinning of all the research activities.

Negotiating with other adult gatekeepers and consent implies a particularly powerful status. Mitchell and Reid-Walsh (2002) talk of convincing children that their interest in popular culture is not going to be criticised or disparaged. This is also relevant when considering young people's reading interests. If their reading choices, habits and interests are not respected, young people would be unlikely to contribute

effectively. A research process which did not value their perspectives would be less likely to find out what young people thought.

The role of the adult researcher affirms the power of adults in relation to knowledge (Mayall, 2002). The structuring of adult-child relations means that even the most empathetic researcher remains an adult who can assert power over children and young people. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) suggest that the relationship between researcher and participant is weighted towards the 'expert' adult. Ethical approaches to research with children, for example, reinforce this dynamic with researchers retaining the adult right to speak to another adult if there are child protection concerns. Much as a researcher may wish to be regarded as independent of the dominant model of adult power in institutions such as schools, this remains a difficult ambition to achieve. I noted in my field notes that I was perceived to be in a quasi-teacher role in the classroom.

While undertaking the research I was aware of the impact of my adult status and my role as a researcher. I wanted, of course, to be regarded as an adult who was empathetic and interested in what young people had to say as well as effective as a professional researcher. It was helpful to be seen as 'other', not as a teacher with classroom authority. However, I was still undeniably in an adult professional role, engaged in what young people would perceive as an adult activity. This is not a unique experience. The quality of the research encounter, even where it is of short duration, is acknowledged to make an impact on the research process. Young people are unlikely to feel comfortable if they are not accorded respect or their views are not valued. In addition, they may find it hard to disagree with adults (Greene and Hill, 2005). The research interview in itself may be an unusual experience for individual young people as they are rarely asked to give their views and describe personal experiences to an adult stranger. One to one encounters with adults who are not known to individual young people may be limited to, for example, being disciplined in school, medical consultations or, for a small number of children and young people, meetings with social workers or the police. These might have negative connotations which in turn impact on young people's participation. On the other hand, Punch

(2002a) suggests that young people who have had contact with adults such as social workers may be more confident in talking about themselves to unfamiliar adults.

In order to disassociate the research from school activities and to create a more discursive atmosphere for the session, I declared my own interest in books when introducing the study (see also Chapter 1). Researchers can take advantage of situations with which they are familiar (Adler and Adler, 2002). This proved to be helpful when, on occasion, young people asked if I had read a particular text or remembered what happened next in a book. However, one young person recognised that there were probably limitations to an adult's interest in children's books:

Adam: Have you ever read the *Captain Underpants* books?

Interviewer: No

Adam: I don't think it would suit for like older people like your age to like read it because it's kind of like a children's book, because it's like a comic.

(Adam aged 11 years)

Adam goes on to talk about the book, highlighting why he found it funny and by implication, why I, as a serious adult, would not. Wannamaker (2008) in her discussion of the Captain Underpants series by Dav Pilkey (2000) states that this series of books is recognised by children and adults as anarchic, subverting traditional models of adult-child relations. Adam's comments suggest that there is a limitation to any attempt by adult researchers to be 'like' young people. Greene and Hill reflect that such an approach is both 'unwise and doomed to failure' (2005: 11). My intention in introducing my own interest in children's books was to help the research discussion rather than, in some coy way, to remove some 'adulthood' from the research encounter. However, some young people, as noted in this quote, were aware that adult incursions into young people's territory were still weighed down by adult concerns. Philo points out:

there is often a gulf – sometimes massive, sometimes more nuanced – in terms of attributes, identities and backgrounds between the person of the researcher and the persons of the researched.

(Philo 2003: 8)

Jokes and humorous dialogue might not hold the same appeal for adults as for young people. Adult researchers are in ambiguous situations. Their intention is to encourage young people's participation, creating a dynamic opportunity for exchange, interaction and communication. However, their position as adults gives them power by virtue of age and role over children and young people. This is even more accentuated in the school environment, subverting a notion of equality and negotiation. Ensuring respectful processes which rebalance these structural challenges are an essential part of research with young people.

Data analysis

Deciding how to analyse data is as important as how to construct research methods. I wanted to focus on the descriptive nature of the study, taking into account Coffey and Atkinson's (1996) view that there are a variety of ways to collect and then analyse data.

The analysis began as soon as I began to jot down draft research questions and make field notes during the visits to schools and gathered momentum as the questionnaires were completed and the interviews took place. Rapley (2004) and Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggest that analysis is an ongoing process. As the field work took place over a period of 18 months, this process was quite extended, resulting in a parallel process of analysing the data while completing the research. The process of data analysis is more than one straightforward process; researchers can uncover nuances, variation and explore complexity through analysis (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). Miles and Huberman (1994) state that there are a number of steps to building up meaning in analysis including noting patterns or themes, grouping data and developing a number of checks and balances. This suggests that analysing data takes time in order for all these processes to happen and for meaning to emerge.

The interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Once transcribed, I read and re-read to identify common themes. The discursive and semi-structured nature of the interviews resulted in data which was, to some extent, unevenly spread across the areas of questioning. The level and depth of responses was highly individual with

some young people responding at greater length than others to specific questions. This less structured approach helped to facilitate young people's individual contribution. I responded to the verbal and non-verbal cues that young people gave about what they wanted to discuss. For a small number of young people who were nervous or uncomfortable, we talked initially about other topics such as skateboarding or holidays. Other participants were keen to talk at length about a particular question or idea. Some were highly enthusiastic. Two boys, for example, were keen to continue to participate in the interview, returning after a school break and reluctant to finish talking at the end of the session. Some young people found it easier to articulate their thoughts than others. This resulted in some responses which were quite discrete and verbally minimal while others were more expressive and extensive. Harden et al (2000) note that even brief responses are still part of the interview. It was important to take into account contextual information from field notes and audio recordings such as non verbal responses, tone and emphasis of responses which might impact on the analysis of data. Distractions, such as interruptions or lunchtime bells ringing had the potential to affect responses and in turn, needed to be acknowledged. Analysing interviews in a way which relies purely on written transcripts and does not consider the affect of other factors limits the analysis process. On the other hand, it can also reduce the research process to minutiae which can unduly hinder analysis of large amounts of data (Riessman, 2008).

Moving away from a high controlled interview process can result in data which covers more (or less) ground than originally expected. Holstein and Gubrium (2004) suggest that 'active interviewers' engage with participants in such a way that new possibilities come from the interview. In this study, a much richer selection of data emerged than anticipated in, for example, comparisons between books and other media such as television and films. This has not been considered in detail in this thesis but will be used in future work around the data from the study. Some of the content of the transcriptions could be attributed to individual questions such as 'what do you like reading?' although a significant proportion of the data did not

automatically lend itself to analysis in this way. This meant that there was a process of sorting out the data that I was seeking and that which came by default.

The differing length and depth of interview responses meant that the process of analysis required a repetitive approach with data explored and re-explored in order to find common themes. It was important to 'cluster' categories and try to understand aspects of the data by grouping elements which had common characteristics (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Some of the data did not easily fit into themes, or linked to other themes such as discussion comparing television and films with books. Data which did not fit neatly into themes required more intensive scrutiny to explore its relevance for the research study. As Riessman suggests, participants can resist the fragmentation of experience into codable groups and the researcher's attempt to 'control meaning' (2002: 695). This results in data which is less easy to group and which is not always able to be used. A challenging part of the process of analysis was to acknowledge, with some reluctance, that not all of the data could be written up in the thesis but would have to be put aside for future exploration.

The data was analysed using a software package, NVivo, which was useful in organising a substantial amount of data. However, I concur with Hallowell et al that, while computer packages are useful, analysing data remains 'primarily dependent upon the choices, decisions and interpretations of individuals' (2005: 8). Weitzman (2000) points that software cannot do the analysis but can be useful in helping with consistency. During the process of initial, and then more in depth analysis, more themes emerged or became sub-themes. These themes were then explored to find common threads and identify significant or interesting data. Predominant themes, in line with the original research questions were then developed into groups under higher ranking headings which then formed the basis for structuring chapters.

Described in this way, the process of analysis was highly repetitive, requiring constant revisiting until I 'knew' my data and was comfortable that I could begin to order what was emerging. The process of reflecting on the data also revealed some strengths and weaknesses in the research design. The areas that been covered in the interviews were wide ranging and it would have been useful to focus more intensely

on questions more tightly focused around a particular subject. On reflection, my study could have explored some areas in more detail such as the impact of gender on young people's engagement with books.

Age and gender, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, were viewed as important factors to be considered in the study. They were taken into account in order to identify where there were similarities and differences. Age differences were more noticeable in the questionnaire data than in interviews. I therefore decided not to analyse the interviews separately by age and gender after initial scrutiny of the data.

The questionnaire was analysed using SPSS 13.0. The statistics that were generated were descriptive which de Vaus (2002) describes as those that provide summaries of patterns from the responses of a sample. One of the challenges in undertaking the analysis was deciding how to analyse the research data and which variables to consider. After first analysing the data by age groups, I then decided to analyse the data by age and gender in order to provide comparison between these groups. Some analysis was also undertaken on a school by school basis to provide feedback to the individual participating schools. This latter analysis is not referred to in this thesis. I was not able to consider all the data from the survey in the study due to the amount of information that was generated (see Chapter 4).

Quotes were used in the thesis to provide examples of what young people said in their own words. Pseudonyms were used for all young people. Quotes can provide a condensed richness of data as well as reflecting individual personalities and styles of communication:

By displaying text in particular ways and by making decisions about the boundaries of narrative segments, we provide grounds for our arguments, just as a photographer guides the viewer's eye with lenses and cropping.

(Riessman, 2008: 50)

I use quotes for more prosaic reasons as well. Quotes can provide a short lively narrative which sit in counterpoint to academic language and contribute an alternative voice to that of the author. They provide the reader with an individual

viewpoint which is sometimes arrestingly presented. They also provide an opportunity for young people's viewpoints to be directly reflected, albeit in short extracts from interviews. These reasons for using quotes reveal potential hazards too, privileging the lively, creative and articulate over young people who said 'yup' or 'I liked it'. Their edited nature can reflect partial meaning if due care is not taken by the researcher.

Validity and generalisability

In this chapter I have explored the methodology that was used in the study. I have discussed factors which have contributed to the internal validity of the research such as the variables associated with the study sample, the setting for the research, the interest of participants in the topic to be researched, the research questions and the data analysis. These are considered in more detail in individual sections of this chapter but are here summarised in terms of their relevance to the internal and external validity of the study.

More participants from the older age group took part in the questionnaire component of the research as secondary schools have multiple year classes for a particular age group and also stream students by ability, a practice which does not take place in primary schools. This ensured that the sample was not biased solely to high achieving students (who might express the most overt interest in books) but also meant that the questionnaire sample of the younger age group was smaller. As I analysed the questionnaire by age, I was able to take differentials in the sample size into account, ensuring the reliability of this data. In addition, I ensured that both boys and girls took part in the research although a slightly larger percentage of girls took part in the interviews. This reflected girls' greater interest in reading. They were therefore more likely to be interested in participating in the study although there was almost equal participation by boys. A further study considering gender differences in more detail would be helpful in exploring these findings further.

Although I aimed to ensure that the sample included a range of elements which would make it broadly representative, this was not based on a statistical

interpretation of representation. However, taking Lewis and Ritchie's (2003) discussion of representational generalisation into account, if a similar study was undertaken elsewhere in the UK, I would expect there to be a broadly similar range of views and experiences. This generalisation would have to acknowledge that there were particular elements not present in my sample such as ethnic diversity. As Lewis and Ritchie state, it is not necessarily how closely the sample is a 'statistical match' that is important for qualitative research, but whether it 'provides the "symbolic representation" by containing the diversity of dimensions and constituencies that are central to explanation' (2003: 269). I aimed to ensure that, within the constraints of a small sample, this diversity was reflected in the study.

In order to have a broad based sample, I invited several schools to take part. Taking into account the findings of research which show that lower income and poverty impact on young people's education and literacy (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Hilton, 1996; Kress, 2003a), I approached a number of schools which were based in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. This ensured that the sample was not biased to participants in high income areas but included those who were likely to be from low income families. However, I did not seek details of students' socio-economic circumstances in either the questionnaire survey or the interviews, focusing predominantly on young people's age and gender. An emphasis on the impact of low income and poverty would have required different methodological approaches across the study including asking young people about the socio-economic status of their parents.

Undertaking the research in schools could have meant that participants associated the research with their formal education. This could deter some students from participating, thereby possibly biasing the research sample. However, by siting most of the research in secondary schools in the school library, I was able to make research sessions more informal and less associated with the school curriculum. I undertook a proportion of the interviews with participants from school book groups. This enabled me to access young people with a particular interest in books. It also potentially restricted the participation of other young people who might not attend these groups. I therefore ensured that some interviews were undertaken with young

people from outside school based book groups. This did not apply to the younger age group who were all interviewed in the classroom but in a confidential space apart from other students.

I do, however, acknowledge that research into young people's reading interests is likely to attract those young people who are engaged with books and read more regularly. By using a questionnaire, I was able to ensure wider participation and a larger more inclusive sample for that part of the study. I also ensured that there was triangulation in the research by using two methods of research, the questionnaire survey and interviews. This enabled me to check the 'clarity' or 'precision' of my research findings (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). Using two methods provided complementarity and increased opportunities for diversifying the sample.

I administered the questionnaire myself, after piloting, to ensure that there were no problems with its reliability in the school environment (see Hill, 2006 and Hopper, 2005). Most questionnaires were fully completed, indicating that the questions were appropriate, consistent and I could have confidence in the answers that were put forward. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the very small numbers that were not completed correctly earlier, suggesting that in these instances young people were withdrawing their consent to take part in the study.

I have discussed particular interview research questions in Chapters 5 and 6, acknowledging the difficulties inherent in their formulation. Although I believe that some of these questions were challenging and would have benefited from being more specific, the responses from young people indicated that they both understood the questions and were able to answer in sufficient depth to make their responses valid. I undertook interviews with pairs of young people or one to one to maximise participation and encourage a discursive approach while use a core set of questions. Interview questions did cover the same topics but were also tailored to meet the needs and interests of individual participants.

To ensure that the data collection and analysis were reliable and added to the validity of the research, I followed good practice research standards in taping interviews,

transcription and the use of software packages to aid analysis. In the process of analysis, I took into account that some data was unevenly distributed across areas of questioning but used a process of clustering data to clarify themes and patterns that were emerging (see Data Analysis section in this chapter for further discussion).

Having considered the different elements of the study, I conclude that the research findings are internally valid within the methodological constraints that I have identified above. I believe that what I have found is also relevant and generalisable to other settings with similar common elements. Although this research is a snapshot and specific to a particular group of young people at a point in time, the study's findings are also applicable to a wider population of this age group and to research, policy and practice debates in associated areas. The study was undertaken in Scotland where there is currently no other research available of a similar sized sample of this age group either of young people's reading interests or their engagement with texts. The study therefore has applicability in a Scottish context as well as UK wide. The findings are relevant to both academic and non academic settings in the areas of literacy and education but also relate to other research interests in children's culture and media and childhood studies generally. In the concluding chapter of the thesis, I draw attention to the findings and their applicability in other settings.

Philo (2003), in his article on how adults research the world of childhood, suggests that we are often overambitious in what we want out of research and are 'disappointed' by the evidence from interviews and ethnography 'since what the children say to us and what we write down about their activities can seem, so, well 'banal'' (2003:20). He goes on to say that this might be because we want adult interpretations, seeking the 'dramatic and the out-of-the-ordinary' when what we should be looking for is what children give us (2003:20). I agree that, as researchers, we are often overambitious and try to find the 'adult' in the 'child' without starting from their life worlds. I have tried to counter this 'adulthood' in the study. This chapter has outlined how I carried out the research, taking into account research approaches which aim to secure the participation of children and young people and recognise their agency. Over the next four chapters, I explore the findings from what

young people said about the representations of childhood in books. The next chapter begins with a consideration of young people's reading interests.

Chapter 4 More than a book

Literacy has both a public and a private pay-off. The first empowers us in society; the second enriches us as an individual and encourages us to think for ourselves...unless, of course, the latter is deliberately 'educated' out of us for the convenience of those who'd really rather we didn't.

(Pullman, 2003)

The focus of this study is on young people's views on representations in the books they read. Taking a narrow perspective of the relationship between young people and books diminishes an understanding of the myriad of factors that influence young people's reading. It gives only a partial picture of young people's engagement with books, ignoring the hinterland of personal and collective experience that readers bring to texts. This study aims to be informed by this wider context by asking young people about their reading habits and interests as well as considering how reading and books relate to other aspects of their lives.

Social constructions of childhood have an impact on all facets of children's everyday experience. Reading and young people's relationships to books are not exempt. Exploring the experience of reading can reveal particular insights into wider understandings of childhood, drawing on a complex interaction of different influences, experiences and purposes that are attached to reading as an activity. It is not difficult to identify a link between views of young people's literacy skills and an adult attachment to perceiving children as human beings. The high status that is given to education is strongly aligned with concepts of children as adults-in-waiting. Young people are expected to perform well in the formal education system so that they can be socially and economically effective as adults. On the other hand, skills in reading and writing are also seen to provide young people with opportunities to participate in society through access to knowledge.

In order to explore whether different constructs of childhood are embedded in young people's reading experiences, this chapter considers young people's reading interests and how they impact on young people's relationships with books. It looks at the findings from a questionnaire survey undertaken as part of the study as well as

drawing on data from the interviews. I consider four areas; are young people reading, what are their reading interests, what are the influences on their reading and how does reading relate to other parts of young people's lives.

Constructing readers

According to Millard, reading is regarded by parents and teachers as the 'prime marker of the literate individual' (1997: 31). The pivotal educational role of literacy means that considerable attention is paid to reading in order to see how well children and young people are doing and what interventions can be put in place to improve their skills. As a result, research is continually being updated in the area of children and young people's reading habits, interests and achievements (Benton, 1995b; Clark and Foster, 2005; Clark et al, 2008; Hall and Coles, 1999; Hancock, 2001; Maynard et al, 2007; Sainsbury and Clarkson, 2008; Twist et al, 2003; Twist et al, 2007).

Adults' perspectives on what children read are often influenced by their own childhood reading experiences and by opinions about what children and young people 'ought' to read rather than what they want to or do read. Some texts, for example, are regarded as having higher value than others; traditional fictional novels have more status than magazines, comics and popular fiction. Marsh and Millard point out that it has:

ever been the case that each older generation feels the culture of younger people to be less demanding in content and to mark a diminution of expertise, or complexity in presentation.

(Marsh and Millard 2000:3).

The potential dissonance, between what adults want young people to read and what young people do read, flags up the contested nature of this activity. We are seen to have socially approved skills when we use the different components that make up literacy (Cook-Gumperz, 2006b). In the same way that this study opened with a description of a perceived crisis in contemporary childhood, what, how much and how well young people read is regarded as a measure of how childhood is doing. This is not just a recent judgment but one that is longstanding and can be traced back through the history of reading. As Meek says:

The history of children's learning to read in our culture has never quite lost its Protestant overtones: the reader's right to unmediated interpretation of a text, especially the Bible, and the rationalization that reading is learning and therefore bound to do us good.

(Meek, 1995: 6)

Traditional discord about what young people read is now being overtaken by different influences. Mono concepts of culture are no longer relevant in the context of new, fragmented and complex understandings of cultural forms (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Reading has moved away from simply being a print-on-paper approach to encompass a wider range of texts (Mackey, 2007). The traditional orientation towards 'classical 'literacy skills'' in schools now has to include media literacy (Bradwell et al, 2008: 47). New approaches to literacy, drawing on digital technologies and a shift from the written word to the visual image provide different kinds of challenges (Kress, 2003a). This makes it more difficult to understand the place of 'old-style' literacy. It gives rise to a question about whether young people are really 'illiterate' if they do not fully engage in reading traditional formats of books. Instead, some young people are developing skills in new media literacies which are unknown to the adults around them. These media are not explored here in depth but research in these areas show that the concepts of 'literacy' and 'texts' are now used in a much wider and more inclusive context than in the past (Bearne, 2003a; Bradwell et al, 2008; Buckingham, 2003; Drotner and Livingstone, 2008; Kress, 2003a; Mackey, 2007; Marsh and Millard, 2000). Assumptions about literacy, the skills of reading and writing, are more complicated than ever before.

A number of key messages have emerged in research about young people's reading patterns which are important starting points for this part of the study and which merit exploration. First and foremost, there is no 'identikit' young reader just as there is no single understanding of childhood or a uniform experience of being a child. There are major differences among young readers according to gender, age, socio-economic status, disability and race just as there are needs, choices and interests which relate to individual readers. Research indicates that children and young people's reading interests are gendered (Clark and Akerman, 2008; Clark and Foster, 2005; Coles and Hall, 2002; Millard, 1997; Sarland, 1991). Reading is seen to be an

activity for girls and girls read more (Millard, 1997). As readers get older, the amount they read decreases and particularly if they are boys (Coles and Hall, 2002; Maynard et al, 2007). Young people in receipt of free school meals enjoy reading less and read less outside of school (Clark and Foster, 2005). Reading is considered to be under threat from other pastimes, particularly young people's use of media such as television and computers (Benton, 1995a). The accelerating advent of new textual practices has an impact on young people's engagement with media that might be remote from those of adults who have a personal and professional interest in young people's reading (Mackey, 2007). These all, in some way, profoundly influence young people's reading and were taken into account in the design of this part of the study which has a particular focus on age and gender.

Surveying young people's reading

In order to find out more about young people's reading interests and habits, a questionnaire survey was undertaken in three primary and three secondary schools. The sample was divided between two different year groups, primary six and year two of secondary school. A total of 158 young people took part, with 103 students from secondary schools and 55 students from primary schools (see Table 4). A higher number of young people from the older age group were involved as the secondary schools were able to facilitate the participation of more young people from a year group. Secondary schools also stream students according to ability so it was important to ensure that the sample was drawn from a wide group of students from a year group to get a diversity of responses. Book groups which were run by the school librarian in each secondary school also took part.

Table 4 Number and age of participants

Age	Number	Percentage
Younger students (Primary 6)	55	34.8
Older students (Secondary 2)	103	65.2
Total	158	100.0

The survey focused on the top and bottom end of the age group with the majority of respondents aged either 10 to 11 years old or 13 to 14 years old. A small number of the young people were slightly outside this age range at 9 or 12 years old but were in the same school year groups and were included in the sample. Of the total sample, 48 per cent were boys and 52 per cent were girls. The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions with tick box options for all but one of the questions (see Appendix A). A number of the questions also had a category, 'other things', which could be added to by individual participants. This was well used by the students and encouraged young people to add specific interests. Most questionnaires were successfully completed with few omissions (see also Chapter 3).

The questionnaire results in this chapter are described by age and by gender with significant similarities and differences highlighted across the two age groups. Responses to the final two questions in the survey on young people's activities out of school and where they got books from have not been explored in detail. This is due to the large amount of data that was generated by the survey. Findings from these two questions are referred to briefly in this and other chapters. I intend to analyse these findings in depth in future publications.

Young people's reading

Considerable attention is given by education professionals, parents and policy makers to young people's skills and interest in reading. Success in educational attainment is frequently measured in terms of young people's reading skills (see Twist et al, 2007). As Kirsch et al (2002) state in a report for the Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD):

Reading therefore is not merely a goal; it is also an important tool in education and individual development, both within school and in later life.

(Kirsch et al, 2002: 15)

But reading is not just an educational competence. It is also part of children and young people's play and leisure, their non scholarised activities. It bridges children's work (school) and their play. So young people's reading can be adult led as part of

the school curriculum or a more freely chosen activity as part of play and leisure. This suggests that reading can be influenced positively and negatively by these two environments.

I asked two complementary questions to find out more about young people's reading habits. Young people were asked how much they were reading and provided with four different categories; 'read lots', 'read a bit', 'don't like reading' and 'find reading difficult' (see Table 5). I reflect further on the categories for this question in Chapter 3, suggesting that there are advantages and disadvantages in using these measures as indicators of how much young people read. A small number of the participants, all male, ticked more than one box indicating that answers were not mutually exclusive. In order to explore young people's reading out of the formal educational environment, young people were asked if they read when they were not at school (see Table 6).

The findings showed an age difference which is consistent with other research (Hall and Coles, 1999; Maynard et al, 2007). The older group of young people read less than the younger age group. Younger girls read more than the boys in their age group but only a few younger boys did not like reading and a small proportion, 10.3 per cent of boys, found reading difficult. This was in contrast to the younger girls, none of whom indicated that they disliked reading or found it difficult. Nearly a third of older girls and boys read a 'lot' but there was a significant decrease in the number of older girls who said that they read a great deal. Instead, over half of older girls and nearly half of boys said that they read a 'bit'.

Table 5 How much young people are reading

How much do you read?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Read lots	37.9	73.1	31.9	32.1
Read a bit	55.2	26.9	46.8	55.4
Don't like reading	3.4	0	14.9	12.5
Find reading difficult	10.3	0	10.6	0

Table 6 Young people reading out of school

Do you read when you are not at school?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Every day	34.5	38.5	16.3	30.4
Sometimes	65.5	61.5	62.8	58.9
Never	0	0	20.9	10.7

The most significant shift in reading habits between the younger and older group was that 14.9 per cent of older boys and 12.5 per cent of older girls said that they did not like reading at all. Approximately the same number of older boys as younger boys found reading difficult, although none of the older girls reported difficulties with reading. The responses suggest that there are three findings which are important to consider. Firstly, girls, particularly younger girls, read more. Secondly, there was a noticeable decline in some of the older group's interest in books. Thirdly, a tenth of boys in both age groups found reading difficult. Young people had diverse reading identities.

Asking young people how much they read does not reveal the places in which this activity takes place. The question about how much young people read away from school aimed to explore this further, taking into account that schools are viewed as a place of control (James et al, 1998; Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1992). This, in turn, might impact on young people's attitudes to reading out of school. On reflection, this question did not adequately differentiate between leisure reading and home study. Rephrasing the question would have provided more detailed information on the balance between compulsory 'school' reading and that which is more likely to be freely chosen by young people.

In the younger age group, over a third of younger girls and boys read every day out of school but most read more occasionally. Among the older age group, more girls than boys read every day with the majority of both reading less frequently. The most significant difference between the younger and the older age group was that a fifth of older boys (20.9 per cent) and a smaller number of girls (10.7 per cent) stated that

they never read out of school. Although most of the older young people read out of school, they indicated that they read less than the younger age group. This was, again, especially the case with older boys.

This picture of reading activity is confirmed by the findings from another question in the survey on the activities that young people were involved in out of school. This question is not analysed in depth in this chapter but the data shows that nearly a third of all participants read most days with 43.7 per cent reading more occasionally. Boys again declared that they read less than girls. Other activities such as seeing friends, watching television, going out and using computers took precedence over reading for most young people. Young people were therefore reading out of school but it was not a regular daily pastime for all young people and was in competition with other activities. One young person, Charlie, who was a keen reader, revealed the competing attractions of other interests:

...because sometimes if I get in from school, if there's nothing on TV like, it's boring, and I go up and play my Playstation and I play the same game over and over again and it's quite boring. So I decide to read because if there's nothing else to do, I read. And if I've no' got anything to read well, that's where the problem comes. I have to wait until something good comes on TV or I think about what I'm going to do on my Playstation or something like that...I like using the computer and going on the internet.

(Charlie aged 11 years)

Other research on children and young people's reading out of school similarly found that books do not necessarily have a high priority as an activity. The National Centre for Research in Children's Literature (NCRCL), as part of its second survey on reading amongst young people, found that the most popular out of school activities amongst young people were listening to music, watching television and videos, and being with friends (Hancock, 2001). A more recent survey found that computer games and sports were the most popular activity for 10 to 15 year olds and the percentage of girls reading dropped as they got older (Schools Health Education Unit, 2007). Livingstone and Bovill in their research on new media found that books were widely viewed by young people as 'old fashioned, boring, frustrating, and on

their way out' (1999: Ch 2, 17). Books were seen to be for school and associated with being solitary (Livingstone and Bovill, 1999).

Comparing young people's reading with other activities, however, can imply that reading should be privileged and is not related to other parts of young people's lives. Mackey (2007) reminds us that talking about reading as if it were separate from everyday life removes it from its social context. As she states:

Reading itself is socially developed, and the web of our daily lives informs our reading in positive and constitutive ways as well. We learn how to read in and through the company of other readers, not simply how to decode but how to place ourselves in relation to a particular text.

(Mackey, 2007:6)

Taking Mackey's point into account, the questions in this study do not fully reveal the interactions between young people's reading and other activities, suggesting instead that reading is a bounded activity which is unrelated to using the computer, listening to music or spending time with friends. This is obviously not the case. The connections between reading and other activities would be a useful area to explore in more detail in future research.

Reading, as highlighted earlier in this thesis, has a number of purposes attributed to it by adults with education seen to be a priority. This may or may not match the interests of young people. In order to find out why young people read, the participants were given a number of reasons why they might read (see Table 7). They could tick as many of the categories as they thought were applicable. The vast majority of the younger age group read because it was fun and they enjoyed it with slightly more boys (86.2 per cent) than girls (80.8 per cent) choosing this option. Over half of younger boys responded that reading helped them 'find out things', understand other 'people/things' better and to a lesser extent, helped them with school work. Younger girls also saw the benefits of reading for school work but only a quarter thought that reading helped them 'find out things' and only a very small proportion of girls thought that it helped them understand more about 'people' and 'things'. More boys than girls in this age group read because they had to read.

Table 7 Why young people read

Why do you read?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
It is fun and I enjoy it	86.2	80.8	44.7	51.8
It helps me find out things	55.2	26.9	38.3	33.9
It helps me with school work	37.9	34.6	23.4	36.4
It helps me understand other people/things	44.8	3.8	17.0	28.6
I read because I have to	10.3	3.8	31.9	21.4
Other things				

The responses for the older age group demonstrated some differences. A much lower number of older boys and girls enjoyed reading although this was still half of older girls (51.8 per cent) and a slightly lower 44 per cent of boys. Over a third of older girls responded that reading helped them with their school work although slightly more boys than girls saw the benefits of reading to find out things. The biggest difference in comparison with the younger age group, however, was that over a quarter of the older age group read because they ‘had to’. This figure was much higher for boys than girls with nearly a third of boys and a fifth of girls identifying that they read because it was compulsory, presumably due to school work or through parental influence.

Some young people also suggested that reading helped counteract boredom and was a way of passing time. Others indicated that it helped with their reading and writing skills. One young person suggested that reading provided opportunities ‘to escape from the real world’ while another used it ‘for cheats’ (finding internet answers to computer game tasks). A number of young people emphasised their dislike of reading.

The responses to these questions identify a number of important factors which impacted on young people’s reading. First of all, young people were reading and read for enjoyment. This was in line with other research which shows that most students enjoyed reading quite a lot or very much (Clark et al, 2005). There were, however, some marked differences in young people’s reading habits depending on age and

gender. The younger age group read more, like reading more and did more of it out of school. Younger girls especially liked reading while younger boys particularly identified the benefits of reading. On the other hand, older boys and girls read less and were less inclined to find reading enjoyable. A more sizeable number read because it was something they had to do rather than because they chose it as an activity. These figures were consistently higher for boys than girls.

These findings illustrate that young people's reading habits can change between the ages of 10 and 14 years of age with some young people less interested in reading as they get older. One boy, Charlie, quoted previously and who had declared an interest in books, anticipated this diminution in interest saying 'I dinnae [don't] think I'm going to read when I'm older' (Charlie aged 11 years). In addition, gender is an important influence with girls consistently more likely to read and be more interested in reading than boys. This finding on gender is compatible with that of other research which found that girls were significantly more likely to enjoy reading (Clark and Akerman, 2008).

The differences relating to young people's age and gender affirm that a narrow construction of childhood cannot encompass the range of young people's reading identities. Viewing children and young people as a homogenous group of readers does not reveal the extent of their reading habits and interests. It also highlights that some young people, particularly older boys and sometimes older girls, do not comply with adult intentions that children and young people should read and should like reading. Kline (1993) found that the vast majority of parents in his study thought that learning to read and write was their main priority for their children's development. This example of parents' commitment to reading, along with that of policy makers and educationalists, becomes a shared concern when young people do not read. This is particularly focused on boys and can be seen as indicative of boys' wider relationship to schools and society (Wannamaker, 2008). Given the high value that is attached to reading as a skill, this suggests that reading can become a contested area as adults seek to ensure that all young people, especially boys, are engaged in the act of reading.

Young people's reading interests

Finding out what young people read provides an opportunity for adults to influence young people's reading interests and to facilitate more access to books. However, as Clark and Rumbold (2006) suggest, it is difficult to find out what children like reading and research presents only a snapshot at a particular point in time of young people's reading preferences. Hopper (2005) points out that what children and young people read is a frequent question for debate but there can be different points of view about what young people should read; teachers and parents hold one perspective and young people have others with certain books seen as poor quality fiction. Horror stories are viewed by adults as instigating fear and anxiety and containing knowledge that is seen as inappropriate for young people (Reynolds, 2001). Books which are humorous and anarchic are regarded by some adults as threatening (Wannamaker, 2008). Texts which are regarded as part of popular culture are often seen as inappropriate for use in school (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Some kinds of reading material therefore have high status while others are seen as having less value.

Young people's reading habits change depending on their age. Clark et al (2005) found that older students read more websites, newspapers and magazines while younger students read jokes, non-fiction and fiction. Girls and boys articulate gender differences in their choice of books (Coles and Hall, 2002). Girls are more likely to be interested in books about relationships and romance while more boys read science fiction and fantasy (Millard, 1997). Children are reading fiction but they are also interested in other forms of literature. In spite of age and gender differences, children and young people appear to enjoy a rich and diverse range of reading material (Clark et al, 2005).

In order to find out about young people's reading interests, participants were asked to choose the kind of texts they liked reading (see Table 8). Categories included fictional and factual books as well as other kinds of reading material such as poetry, magazines and comics, 'stuff on the internet', game books (used to play fantasy games) and comic strip books. These options take account of the fact that contemporary reading now includes all kinds of text (Bearne, 2003a).

Comics and magazines were extremely popular across gender and age groups. Nearly all the younger girls chose magazines while a majority of younger boys chose comics. The older age group showed a similar liking for magazines with most girls and over half of boys choosing magazines. Older boys still read comics but in smaller numbers. Younger boys liked *The Beano* and *The Simpsons* and also car magazines such as *Autotrader* and *Fast Car*, magazines about computer games and sport including fanzines for particular football clubs. Some older boys continued to read comics such as *The Simpsons*, *Dandy*, *Beano* and *Oor Willie* and also chose magazines which focused on computer games such as *Playstation 2* and *Zoo* as well as sport magazines or football fanzines. Younger girls read magazines such as *Smash Hits*, *Girl Talk*, *Shout* and *Top of the Pops* while many older girls read two or more magazines, picking magazines targeted at teenage girls such as *Bliss* and *Sugar* and also chose women's magazines such as *Chat*, *Hello* and *OK*.

Table 8 What young people like reading

What do you like reading?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Books – stories	62.1	80.8	57.1	52.4
Books – facts and information	37.9	26.9	23.4	25.0
Magazines	58.6	88.5	55.3	78.6
Comics	79.3	3.8	40.4	16.1
Game books	65.5	23.1	46.8	5.4
Stuff on the internet	65.5	42.3	50.0	44.6
Comic strip books	48.3	3.8	21.7	5.4
Poems	17.2	48.0	8.5	26.8
Books in another language	3.4	7.7	2.2	3.6
Don't read	0	0	13.0	5.4
Other things				

The popularity of comics and magazines is unsurprising. Clark et al (2005) found that magazines, along with text messages and websites, were the most popular reading material among young people. Comics and magazines have always been regarded as popular culture and by implication of less literary worth (Barker, 1989; Kline, 1993; Marsh and Millard, 2000). Reading comics and magazines is also an activity that happens at home rather than school (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Comics

are one of the few goods that are cheap enough to be bought by children themselves, indicating that they reflect a personal and often independent purchasing and reading choice by young people (Kline, 1993). They therefore have a special place for children and young people even though they are not necessarily highly regarded by adults as literary or worthy texts.

The majority of young people picked fictional books as texts they liked reading, although they were most frequently chosen by the younger age group, again notably by girls. This is in line with other research which found that almost half of young people enjoyed fiction (Clark et al, 2005). All young people liked reading on the internet although boys across the age groups liked the internet more. Boys also chose game books and comics strip books but few girls chose these texts. On the other hand, almost half of younger girls and a quarter of older girls liked poetry. Factual books were more popular with younger boys than with older boys and girls. Younger boys liked comics, stories, game books and the internet while girls chose stories and magazines but also liked the internet and poetry. Older boys' reading interests were spread across stories, magazines and the internet with game books and comics not far behind while girls' main interests were magazines, stories and the internet.

Newspapers and sports sections of newspapers were mentioned specifically by the older age group in the open category. Other additions included 'books about movies, md and rap [music] magazines', 'world war 1 and 2' and 'history books'. The majority of contributions to this open category came from boys. Coles and Hall (2002) point out that boys tend to read more newspapers than girls do and that their magazines are 'information rich' rather than narrative in style. Although text messages, emails and chat room communications were not mentioned by any young person, these were omissions from the list of categories which should be included in any future research.

Young people were asked what they liked reading about (see Table 9). Some of the categories were identifiable as literary genres while others focused on subjects or types of books. Some were fictional texts while others could be either fact or fiction.

The categories were chosen after looking at other reading surveys and websites. The Cool Reads (2002) website, which posts reviews by young people, was helpful in identifying categories and describing them concisely ('fun stuff' and 'short and snappy').

Although 'fun stuff' and 'mystery and adventure' were popular with both boys and girls, gender played a significant role in the reading choices of the younger age group. The majority of younger boys were also keen on books about 'suspense and horror', 'action stories' and 'war'. Sport was chosen by over half of the boys and a smaller but significant number also liked books about 'real life'. Nearly half of younger girls liked 'things to do with real life', 'romance and love stories' and 'characters and school stories'. Although many of the younger age group's answers showed that they had preferences according to gender, boys and girls also stepped over the gendered line. One fifth of boys, for example, chose 'romance and love stories' while nearly a third of girls chose 'suspense and horror' and some chose 'action' and 'survival'.

Table 9 What young people like reading about

What do you like reading about?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Mystery and adventure	86.2	53.8	44.7	48.2
Suspense and horror	75.9	30.8	44.7	44.6
Action stories	79.3	15.4	48.9	16.1
Survival	55.2	15.4	29.8	12.5
Animals and nature	46.4	38.5	10.6	19.6
Things to do with real life	37.9	46.2	17.4	60.7
War	72.4	7.7	29.8	7.1
Romance and love stories	20.7	46.2	8.5	26.8
Characters and school stories	17.2	46.2	14.9	23.2
People/Places in the past	31.0	11.5	12.8	17.9
Fun stuff	69.0	50.0	46.8	51.8
Biography (about real people)	17.2	11.5	14.9	23.6
Short stories and snappy reads	37.9	38.5	23.4	32.1
Sports	51.7	7.7	51.1	14.3
Other things				

Older young people were similarly interested in ‘mystery and adventure’, ‘suspense and horror’ and ‘fun stuff’ with only small differences between boys and girls. Sport again was the most popular category for just over half of older boys with ‘action stories’ close behind. A slightly lower number of boys liked ‘survival’ and ‘war’. The majority of older girls, 60.7 per cent, liked ‘things to do with real life’, a much higher percentage than any other group in this category. ‘Romance and love stories’ and ‘characters and school stories’ were picked by around a quarter of older girls, a substantially lower percentage in comparison with the younger girls. Nearly a third of the older girls liked ‘short stories and snappy reads’.

Young people added other interests to the open category including ‘celebrities’, ‘cheats’ for computer games, ‘issues about my life’, ‘TV listings gossip and what’s going on in soaps’, ‘football’, ‘sci fi’, ‘music books/music quiz’, ‘history, geography, science’, ‘dragons’, ‘supernatural’ and ‘history books and mythology’. These emphasise young people’s individual reading interests, some of which are related to popular culture such as music, computers or television, sport or to particular interests in factual subjects or fictional genres. These varied interests also emerged in research interviews:

I like reading horror, action, suspense. All stuff. I like some science fiction, not too cheesy one. What else is there? I like information books as well. I like Garfield⁸. Really funny.
(Jack aged 11 years)

I like, like adventure books and funny books as long as they’re like... I dinnae [don’t] really like, like realistic books but I dinnae mind autobiographies. Just long as it’s really like something that disnae [doesn’t] like drag on. As long as it like it’s straight into the story.
(Paul aged 13 years)

I like reading like teenage kind of romantic funny kind of books and I like reading adventure books. Like the Famous Five⁹ and things. And I like, I don’t know what category it would come into, but like *The Lord of the Rings*¹⁰ and *The Hobbit*¹¹ and things like that.
(Rhona aged 13 years)

The findings for this question showed that young people's fictional choices were influenced by their age and gender although some kinds of books such as mystery and adventure books and 'fun stuff' were popular with all groups. Suspense and horror books were liked by younger boys and the older age group but less so by younger girls. Boys were attracted to what would be seen as more traditionally male interests with 'action stories', 'war' and 'survival' with 'sports' consistently popular. Girls, on the other hand liked 'things to do with real life' with older girls particularly choosing this category. Younger girls spread their interests across female orientated 'romance and love stories' and 'characters and school stories'. However, across most categories, boys and girls also made choices in lower numbers which were not gendered, indicating that straightforward assumptions cannot be made about young people's reading interests. Young people's gendered relationships to books are explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

Young people's reading interests included a wide range of texts as well as different types and genres of fiction. This emphasises that a narrow view of what young people read is a diminution of their more extensive reading interests. Fiction in the traditional novel format is the reading material of choice in the school environment (Coles and Hall, 2002) but this can exclude other texts that young people enjoy. Adult constructions of reading can view young people's choices negatively, caught between a view of children as human beings and a concern about troubling and non-compliant young people who are either not reading or making what adults view as poor reading choices. How young people are constructed is imposed on the texts they read. Talking about boys' reading in particular, Wannamaker (2008) points out that there is a 'disconnect' between what adults think boys should read and what boys are actually reading. On the other hand, the findings from these questions reveal that young people made choices identifying what they liked reading, displaying their active readership of texts. These choices are affected by age and gender as well as by a range of other influences which are explored in the next section.

Influences on young people's reading

Reading a book is influenced by more than its textual content or its genre. Research has shown that there are a range of factors which contribute to making a young person want to read a book (Maynard et al, 2007; Hancock, 2001; Hopper, 2005). What the book looks like and how it is presented influences what young people choose to read (Mackey, 2001). Even children's books published in the nineteenth century tried to attract the interest of young people by covers and illustrations (Zipes, 2001). Hopper's (2005) research found that a number of factors influenced what young people read. These factors include already knowing about an author or book, how the book looks, a personal recommendation, the adaptation of a book to television or film and a book being in a particular genre (Hopper, 2005).

Research has also found that other people including family, friends and teachers are influential in young people's reading. Girls are more responsive to the influence of their peers in their reading choices (Hancock, 2001). The home environment is also important for sustaining and developing literacy practices (Clark et al, 2005). Mothers are important for making book choices (Hancock, 2001) and for initially teaching children to read (Clark et al, 2005). The lack of influence of fathers mirrors a picture of lower levels of reading fiction among male adults (Clark and Foster, 2005). Teachers are more significant as advisors on reading for girls than for boys (Hancock, 2001).

In order to find out the influences on reading in this study, young people were given categories of what might make them want to read a book (see Table 10). The options included how a book was presented, what affected their choice of reading and familiarity with the author or subject. A second question focused on what made young people *not* want to read a book using the same categories reversed with, for example, *liking the writer* becoming *not liking the writer*.

Table 10 What make young people want to read a book

What makes you want to read a book?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
The cover- illustrations and design	69.0	61.5	29.8	66.1
What's on the back of the book	55.2	53.8	51.1	46.4
Someone tells me about it	44.8	42.3	36.2	60.7
My friends like it	31.0	36.0	25.5	43.6
I have read books by that writer before	44.8	46.2	29.8	48.2
It's easy to get hold of that book	20.7	0	8.5	10.7
I see a film or TV programme about the book	55.2	30.8	29.8	37.5
It's for girls (I am a girl)	3.4	69.2	2.1	33.9
It's for boys (I am a boy)	62.1	3.8	21.3	3.6
I like books about that subject	34.5	19.2	21.3	26.8
I am given it to read in school	6.9	15.4	8.5	10.7
It looks easy to read	24.1	23.1	21.3	26.8
Other things				

The younger age group were strongly influenced by the book cover, its illustration and design. Younger boys were slightly more likely to be drawn to a book by its cover than girls. What was on the back of the book was influential for over half of younger boys and girls. This was reinforced by comments from the interviews:

I went by the blurb. The blurb was rubbish but when you read the book, there's lots of nice colourful picture and stuff in it. The front cover sort of attracts to the book. It's nice. *Midnight*¹² is just a blue book with moons on it. It's not really interesting but it's good.

(Sophie aged 10 years)

I dinnae [don't] like any of the books at the school because they're not very like... whenever you read the blurb on the back, you think, that disnae [doesn't] sound very interesting and then you go to another book and then you think, 'that sounds alright' so you keep that.

(Calum aged 11 years)

In comparison with the younger group, the way a book looked was important to the majority of older girls but was only half as important to older boys. However, what was on the back of the book influenced over half of older boys and was only slightly less important to girls:

Ye can tell if they are good by the blurbs at the back.

(Amy aged 13 years)

It's a really good book. And like, on another cover on the front bit and there people have written into the company saying 'it's a brilliant book' and they've put two letters on the cover saying 'it's really good' and it is. It's a really good book.

(Rhona aged 13 years)

Readers were asked if they would read a book which they thought was for boys or, conversely, for girls. The younger age group were heavily influenced by the target audience for a book. The majority of girls (69.2 per cent) would read a book if they thought it was for girls. A slightly smaller 62.1 per cent of boys would read a book which they thought was for boys. The older age group was less influenced by whether a book was perceived to be for girls or boys with only a third of girls and a fifth of boys stating that this was the case.

Being told about a book influenced the reading choice of under half of younger boys and girls. Slightly more girls than boys would read a book if their friends recommended it. Being given a text to read in school was not very influential although more girls were more ready to read a book which they accessed via school than boys. Almost half of younger boys and girls would read a book if they had read one by the same author before. The profiling of a film or television adaptation of a book made it attractive to more boys than girls. Liking books about the subject had some influence on reading interests while easy access to books was important for a fifth of boys but made no difference at all to girls. On the other hand, nearly a quarter of younger boys and girls would read a book if it looked easy to read.

Older girls were more influenced by being told about a book and it being recommended by friends than other groups in this sample. Older boys, conversely, stated that they were less influenced by other people and friends than any of the other groups. School had a minimal influence on reading interests for both older boys and girls. Television and film adaptations influenced girls' reading interests more than boys. Easy access to a book did not make a substantial difference to the majority of the older age group. Young people across the two age groups who added comments

on why they were attracted to a book said: ‘it’s enjoyable. It’s funny’, ‘stuff that I am interested in’, ‘if the stories inside magazines are good’, ‘cheats for a game I have got’ and because a book had had good reviews.

What put young people off reading a book did not necessarily mirror these answers (see Table 11). The cover did not deter young people to the same extent and the blurb on the back of the book put off only a few of the younger age group. There was still a predominantly gendered response to a question about whether boys and girls did not read books which they saw as being targeted at the other gender with 61.5 per cent of girls and 55.2 per cent of boys discouraged from reading these texts.

The influence of others was significant. Being told that a book was not very good put off a high proportion of the younger age group with significantly more boys than girls influenced by this feedback. Friends not liking a book affected the choices of almost a quarter of boys and girls while being given a book to read in school put off more boys than girls. A book that appeared difficult to read was more of a deterrent for boys.

Table 11 What puts young people off reading books

What puts you off reading a book?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
The cover- illustrations and design	27.6	26.9	29.8	30.4
What’s on the back of the book	6.9	15.4	26.1	32.1
Someone tells me it is not very good	62.1	42.3	36.2	57.1
My friends don’t like it	24.1	23.1	17.0	21.8
I don’t like the writer	37.9	38.5	25.5	32.1
It is difficult to get hold of that book	20.7	19.2	12.8	17.9
I don’t know anything about it	17.2	19.2	23.4	14.3
It’s for girls (I am a boy)	55.2	7.7	25.5	5.4
It’s for boys (I am a girl)	10.3	61.5	4.3	32.1
I don’t like books about that subject	41.4	61.5	36.2	48.2
I am given it to read in school	27.6	15.4	25.5	21.4
It looks easy to read	27.6	19.2	23.4	16.1
Other things				

There was less variation in the older age group between what encouraged and discouraged them from reading a text. Being put off by the cover influenced nearly a third of older boys and girls. They continued to be less influenced than the younger group by a perceived gender targeting of books. On the other hand, they were put off a book if told it was not good with more girls than boys citing this influence. There was a high affirmative response to this question suggesting that the views of others were important. A quarter of older boys and just over a fifth of girls were put off a book by being given it to read in school. Boys were more reluctant to read a book if they perceived it was difficult. Young people who added their comments about why they did not like a book said: 'it looks stupid', 'it's puzzling or confusing', 'it's boring at the start' and 'it just looks boring'.

These findings demonstrate the impact of a wide variety of factors on young people's reading with, again, some differences in age and gender. How a book looked and how it was presented was significant for all young people. Hearing about a book from another person was relatively important as was the influence of friends. Familiarity with an author encouraged young people to read a book. Being given a book to read in school did not encourage many young people to read a book with more boys put off by this connection with school. Younger boys and girls were more influenced by whether a book was seen to be targeted at the other gender although this influence was still relevant for the older age group.

It is apparent, therefore, that young people's engagement with texts have influences far beyond those of the content of the book and that these interactions are impacted on by factors as diverse as other media, gender positioning, social relationships and consumer marketing of products. There is also a wider context which is influential including consumer culture and the construction of childhood and the media (Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone, 2002; Wannamaker, 2008). Analysing the findings to the questions considered in this section, however, gives only an intimation of the constructions of these different influences. On the one hand, young people were able to identify factors that impact on their engagement with texts; they were skilled and competent in defining these influences. Young people appeared to have the 'critical literacy' which Drotner and Livingstone (2008) suggest is required in a media

orientated world. Young people, after all, are learning to be literate through many different experiences (Cook-Gumperz, 2006b). On the other hand, the findings suggest that there is something more intricate and subtle taking place with a complex interaction of young people's roles as readers and adults' roles as producers. Those researching children's culture are sceptical about an uncritical acceptance of children as social agents as the privatisation and commercialisation of children's media and the defining of these products is still in the hands of adults (Buckingham, 2000; Kinder, 1999). Young people's active readership of books has to be balanced alongside adult led production, marketing and mediating of texts.

Reading and young people's lives

A traditional notion of reading as a solitary activity underestimates the relevance of social interactions around the books that people read. In order to explore the significance of books and reading in the context of other aspects of their lives, young people were asked who they talked to about what they read (see Table 12) and the possessions they had in their bedrooms (see Table 13). In the first question, young people were given the choices of different groups of people that they might talk to with an open option for other people not included in the list. The category 'book group' was added during the research as all the secondary schools had active book groups. On reflection, the choices should have included 'school librarian' as well as 'teacher'. Internet options such as blogs and websites could also be included in future research in order to take account of the substantial growth in use of online resources.

As was seen in the previous section, family, friends and school teachers influenced young people's reading interests (Hancock, 2001; Clark et al, 2005). Most of the younger group talked with their friends and many talked to their parents or carers about books. This was particularly significant among girls with 80.8 per cent of girls and a lower 55.2 per cent of boys talking to a parent. Nearly a third of boys and girls discussed books with a teacher. Just over a quarter of the younger age group discussed books with a sibling. Only a small number discussed books within a school book group, taking into account that not all the primary schools had a book group.

Nearly a quarter of younger boys talked about books to nobody while only a very small proportion of younger girls, 3.8 per cent, spoke to no-one.

Table 12 Do young people talk about what they read

Do you talk about what you read? %	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
With my friends	58.6	57.7	31.9	51.8
My parents/carers	55.2	80.8	23.4	30.4
Teacher	31.0	30.8	38.3	25.0
School book group	10.3	7.7	21.3	35.7
Brothers and sisters	27.6	26.9	12.8	23.2
With no-one	24.1	3.8	36.2	32.1
Someone else				

The older group spoke less to parents and carers about books with a steep drop in the percentage of older girls talking to parents, 30.4 per cent in comparison with the younger girls' figure of 80.8 per cent. A much smaller 23.4 per cent of boys talked to parents, a drop of over half from the younger group. Friends were still important for over half of girls. Older boys were much less likely to talk to friends about books than younger boys. A quarter of older girls talked to teachers. Older boys talked to teachers in higher numbers than did any of the other groups of young people. This is a notable statistic since older boys read less than girls or younger boys. However, responses to this question did not reveal whether teachers were proactively chosen by young people as it may be that discussing books was regarded as a compulsory part of classroom activities.

The school book group was important as a place to talk about books for older girls and boys, helped by the presence of book groups in all the secondary schools taking part. Older girls talked to siblings while only a small number of boys spoke to brothers or sisters. A significant age related difference was the number of older girls who spoke to no-one, nearly a third in comparison with the very small proportion of younger girls. Over a third of older boys spoke to no-one, an increase of 10 per cent on the younger group of boys. Young people in both age groups mentioned specific

members of the family such as their mum or dad, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, librarians, neighbours or particular friends.

The findings for this question are not dissimilar to the findings of other research. Clark and Foster (2005) found that most participants would discuss reading with their mothers, fathers and friends. Young people at primary school were more likely to discuss what they read with other people and girls would discuss books more than boys (Clark et al, 2005). The most striking finding in answer to this question is that older young people spoke far less to their parents and carers than the younger age group. Friends were important to all young people but less so to older boys although this was still nearly a third of this group.

In order to explore the place of books in relation to other interests, young people were asked what possessions they had in their bedrooms (see Table 13). Mitchell and Reid Walsh (2002) highlight the importance of bedrooms, rather than playgrounds, for studying popular culture. What children have in their own personal living space reveals not only their particular interests but often gender and socio-economic differences (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002). A survey by Clark and Foster (2005) found that most young people read in their bedrooms while Livingstone's (2002) study of new media and young people found that screen media dominated young people's bedrooms above other forms. Livingstone's (2002) study identified a number of notable shifts in young people's use of space in and out of home. These included the notion of the family watching television together being replaced by a 'bedroom culture' where young people engaged with media in their own rooms. In addition, Livingstone (2002) found that the gendering of leisure space in and out of the home had changed with more boys likely to be on their computers rather than being outside. Parents are concerned about their children being out and about outside whereas young people could be more closely monitored at home even if they are in their own rooms (Buckingham, 2000; Livingstone, 2002). Bedrooms have become important places for young people as a manifestation of their identities (Livingstone, 2002).

Table 13 What young people have in their bedrooms

What things do you have in your bedroom?	Younger students %		Older students %	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Games (board games, cards)	79.3	69.2	51.1	37.5
Equipment for playing music	55.2	65.4	70.2	75.0
TV	86.2	84.6	93.6	76.8
Toys (that I play with now or when I was younger)	72.4	57.7	23.4	32.7
Books	82.8	88.5	55.3	58.9
DVD or video player	79.3	76.9	87.2	73.2
Magazines and comics	75.0	65.4	59.6	67.9
Computer	51.7	34.6	70.2	50.0
Gameboy/playstation/gamecube	93.1	65.4	91.5	50.0
Sports equipment	69.0	42.3	72.3	28.6
Things to make me look good (makeup, hair gel)	41.4	80.8	44.7	76.8
My brother's or sister's stuff	44.8	57.7	19.1	35.7
Other things				

There is a contradictory adult discourse reflected in young people's access to different technologies. On one hand, adults are providing the financial means for the purchase of these products for their children. On the other, there is adult concern about the supposed negative consequences of unmediated and uncensored access to television, computer games, the web and social networking sites. Debates on digital technologies are emotive and reflect completely opposing points of view (Buckingham, 2000; Byron, 2008). Books are usually regarded as more appropriate as a cultural product for children. Television, computer and other media, on the other hand, can be viewed as unwholesome and dangerous (Buckingham, 2000). Many young people have access to the resources to be multi-literate but this access is uneven with some young people in this and Livingstone's (2002) study indicating that they do not have these products in their bedrooms. What young people have in their bedrooms therefore is one manifestation of the contemporary textual environment of modern day childhood, revealing ambiguities and contradictions that are common to discourses about childhood.

The categories in this survey included different kinds of electronic equipment such as music systems, game machines, computers, DVD players and television, toys and games, books, magazines and comics, sports equipment, a category called 'things to make me look good'; and siblings' 'stuff'.

In the younger age group, most of the participants had books. Slightly more girls (88.5 per cent) had books than boys (82.8 per cent). Most had magazines and comics in their bedrooms. There were some gender differences in the possessions of the younger age group. Approximately the same percentage of boys and girls (85.5 per cent) had televisions in their bedrooms but a far higher number of boys (93.1 per cent) had some kind of game console than girls (65.4 per cent). On the other hand, girls had slightly more music equipment than boys but both genders had a high number of DVD players. Over half of boys had computers in their bedrooms compared with just over a third of girls. Boys had more toys and games in their bedrooms than girls as well as substantially more sports equipment. Girls tended to have more of their siblings' belongings in their rooms than boys.

The older age group showed some marked differences as well as some similarities to the younger group. Notably, fewer of the older young people had books in their bedrooms, 55.3 per cent of boys and 58.9 per cent of girls although magazines and comics were again popular. There were some gender differences in terms of who had electronic equipment. More boys had televisions in their bedrooms than girls. A larger number of older boys also had computers and game consoles, DVD players and sports equipment. Girls had slightly more music equipment than boys. More girls, like younger girls, had siblings' possessions in their bedrooms. Young people added very personal possessions to the category 'other things' including 'teddys (sic)', 'pictures', 'my pet turtle', 'stuff that my sister leaves in my room that I can't be bothered getting rid of' and 'phone and phone charger'.

The responses show that the vast majority of the younger age group had books in their bedrooms but they were a diminishing presence in bedrooms as young people got older although over 50 per cent of older boys and girls still had books. The majority of young people had televisions, an average of 85 per cent across the age

groups. This is an increase from Livingstone's (2002) research undertaken in the late 1990s which found that two third of young people in her study had televisions in their bedrooms. Generally, the older age group had more electronic equipment than the younger age group although it was noticeable that boys had more of these possessions than girls. These findings concur with those of Livingstone (2002) which found that older children were more 'media rich' and this applied especially to boys. Books are more likely to be owned by girls and to be present in middle class homes (Livingstone, 2002). Research undertaken by Facer et al (2001), with the same age group as this study, found that a fifth of young people in their sample had sole access to a computer, a significantly lower percentage than this study. This shows that young people's access to technology has significantly increased over the last decade. The findings also reveal the extent of young people's multi media activity and individual access to a variety of technologies. As Mackey points out, contemporary young people 'can enter textual representations through a variety of portals' (2007: 8). This rich textual environment also suggests that there can be a gap between the literacies of home and those of school (Grainger, 2004). Young people had several kinds of media in their own personal space. Reading is therefore one of many activities competing for the attention of young people at home.

Implications for the study

The findings from this survey have a number of implications for the rest of the study and more generally for how young people relate to books. Constructions of childhood can suggest that childhood is a homogenous experience with the meanings that are attributed to childhood depending on the context; so all children can be vulnerable in one setting and troubling in another, with little attention paid to the particularity of the experience for individuals and groups of young people.

The survey on young people's reading interests and habits suggests that, although there are some common patterns to young people's reading for all those who took part, there are also some significant influences which can be attributed to particular groups of young people as well as to individual young people's choices. Age and gender, and the relationship between the two, emerge as significant indicators of

young people's relationships to books. This finding threads itself through the survey data, manifesting itself in responses from the different types of texts that young people liked reading through to the 'media rich' environment of young people's own bedrooms.

The commitment of adults (and many young people) to the purposes attached to literacy indicate that reading can become a contested activity, caught between the notion of young people's agency in deciding what, when and how they want to read alongside the overwhelming commitment to reading as an educational activity, grounded predominantly in a view of children as 'becomings'. All aspects of young people's engagement with books can then be interrogated from the type and content of books, to the influences on reading to the way in which reading sits alongside the activities of childhood. This is a wide ranging subject for investigation which I have only begun to explore in this chapter. The following three chapters consider young people's views on different aspects of the representation of childhood within books, first considering their reflections on what is 'real' in the texts they read.

⁸ *Garfield* (Davis, 1998) – a humorous series of comic strip books about a cat.

⁹ Famous Five series of 21 books by Enid Blyton with the first, *Five on a Treasure Island*, published in 1942.

¹⁰ *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1968 [1954/1955])

¹¹ *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1937)

¹² Wilson, J (2003)

Chapter 5 'Real life' fictions

'Fiction is participative. When you get into it, it's about you exercising your imagination'.

A.L. Kennedy quoted in *The Guardian* (Jeffries, 2008)

Children's books are written by adults and read by children and young people, reflecting a pattern of adult-child relations which is dominant across all aspects of children's lives. Social constructions of childhood flow from this adult dominance and children's books are not exempt from this influence. Adults are responsible for creating and mediating texts for children and these roles suggest that adult constructions of childhood are prioritised in texts. This chapter aims to explore if this is the case by considering young people's views on the fictional representations they encounter, offering an opportunity to assess whether adult depictions of childhood are valued by readers. By focusing on this area, I aim to pursue a theme outlined at the beginning of this thesis, if and how children's books provide a space for children and young people in an adult constructed world.

As well as creating fantastical and imaginary places, characters and stories, books provide a fictional interpretation of human experience which can be viewed as 'realistic' or like 'real life' although these terms have complex and uncertain meanings. Their usage by young people suggests a critical engagement with the books they read, emphasising an active rather than passive relationship to texts. In order to explore whether children's books provide credible representations of the experiences and interests of young people, participants were asked to reflect on the relationship between books and 'real life'. This chapter begins by considering fictional and social constructions of 'reality'. It analyses young people's views on what they thought was 'real' in books, considering books which they suggested were predominantly 'realistic' and those which were seen to be fantastical.

Berger and Luckmann (1967) point out that sociological uncertainty about the concept 'real' requires those who are 'meticulous' to put the associated terms in quotation marks whenever they are used. This, they suggest, is awkward stylistically.

I agree and will use quotation marks judiciously at the beginning of this chapter and elsewhere where it is helpful to emphasise the uncertain nature of the terms ‘real’, ‘reality’, ‘realistic’ and ‘real life’.

Reflecting on ‘real life’

In order to find out whether books provided a social and cultural space which reflected young people’s interests, participants were asked to reflect on the relationship between books and ‘real life’. This is a highly problematic question (what is ‘real’, what is ‘real life’, how can a text be ‘realistic’?). ‘Reality’, as Berger and Luckmann (1967) note, is socially constructed as well as difficult to define. In books, the concept of ‘realism’ relates to the credibility of the text rather than it being a replication of the external world (Cobley, 2001). Young people who participated in the research had to be able to conceptualise meanings of ‘real’ in and out of books in order to discuss this question; they had to have cultural capital, to take Bourdieu’s (1984) use of the term, to enter into critical discourse. This complexity did not mean that young people were unable to talk about what they thought was real. Young people’s responses indicated that they recognised the applicability of the term to literary texts. ‘Real life’ had been used as a category in the questionnaire to describe the kind of books young people liked with many choosing this option (see Chapter 4). It was also used by young people with reference to other media, suggesting that it was commonly understood as a term of reference for narrative representations. Most young people were therefore able to respond to this question, drawing on their own understanding of the term which was then explored in the interview discussions. A minority of young people found this question harder to answer. A small number of these participants acknowledged the innate philosophical complexity of the question. Others, especially those young people who did not like reading, could not relate it easily to their own reading experiences. Using examples of other texts helped to explore this further (see Chapter 3).

On reflection, this question was challenging and, at the same time, superficially simplistic. What appears real, both in and out of texts, eludes easy definition,

although the words and concepts are widely used to describe phenomena or experiences and their representation. As Hacking suggests, words such as ‘facts, truth, reality and even knowledge are not objects...’ (1999: 22). They are instead ‘used to say something about the world, or about what we say or think about the world’ (Hacking, 1999: 22-23). The word ‘real’, therefore, has no firm agreed meaning. Its usage, however, is commonplace and young people’s responses indicate that they readily used the term.

I began the study with an assumption about what was ‘real’ in fiction, based partly on literary conventions about socially realistic texts and relating this to the everyday experiences of young people. This was a somewhat hazy definition which proved to be more complex when used self-consciously and interrogatively by myself as a researcher. Asking young people about such an imprecise concept was potentially unproductive. But young people’s competences in responding to a demanding question should not be underestimated. Most young people answered this question with verbal confidence. Using an everyday term, ‘real life’, helped to shortcut the intricacy of theoretical debates about what is reality which might have made this question difficult to pose or to answer. It was the underlying complexity of the question that was challenging, not young people’s ability to discuss the subject area. The skills of children and young people in defining reality are also noted in other research. Lowe (2007) undertook a study of her own children’s reading from birth to eight years of age. She found that the children understood the ‘reality status of the fictional, secondary world’ even in early childhood (Lowe, 2007: 65). They could relate to the difference between a fictional and an external world. This ability is also present in children’s engagement with other media. Research shows that young children can make judgements about reality in television (Buckingham, 2000; Messenger Davies, 2008). This question was therefore a valid way of exploring young people’s views on the credibility of texts.

Stories: fact or fiction?

Young people engaged with the many purposes of reading, enjoying stories for their imaginative possibilities as well as using texts for learning:

It helps me understand how other people live and it kind of helps me with my story writing as well because it gives me ideas.

(Laura aged 10 years)

It's better imagining stuff cos, em, it's what ye want it to be. Like I'd say books are better [than films] cos ye get loads of descriptions.

(Paul aged 13 years)

Most young people who took part in the questionnaire survey said that they read because the activity was fun and enjoyable and a substantial number read because it helped them to gain knowledge (see Chapter 4). An interest in learning was partially aligned with adults' focus on formal education with over a third of the younger boys and all girls stating that reading helped with school work. This figure was lower in the case of older boys. At other times, learning from books was linked to personal interests. A quarter of the young people read to understand more about the world but, at the same time, a significant fifth of young people viewed reading as a compulsory activity. This was particularly the case again for boys in the older age group. Enjoyment, learning and compulsion all contributed to young people's reading objectives.

Stories have always been seen to have a number of purposes, but those for children and young people have an additional value by virtue of what Hollindale (1997) calls children's 'provisional' status, their transitional position on the way to adulthood. This, in turn, impacts on the content of stories for children with multiple objectives embedded in the text in order to respond to the perceived needs of the developing child. Bearne states that:

When we tell stories to children we want to enthrall and transport them into the world of the imagination, but we also want them to learn about how life should be lived.

(Bearne, 2000:183)

This double ambition emphasises the ways in which child readers are constructed. On one hand, children are seen as human beings in the making, to be moulded and formed. Adults want them to learn about the world and be socialised through the

experience of reading. Bruner states that human culture is a way 'by which "instructions" about how humans should grow are carried from one generation to the next' (1986: 135). This asserts the priority that adults give to the apprenticeship status of childhood with books being one of the tools used by adults to prepare children for initiation into adulthood. But books also provide other kinds of spaces.

Adults benignly support books' role in fostering young people's intellectual and emotional independence. So books can provide the setting for an interior journey where young people can participate in the experience of reading as explorers in imaginary landscapes (Bearne, 2000). Although this suggests that children have the status of learners, it also intimates that young people can choose to be autonomous participants in the texts they read. A number of young people alluded to a sense of belonging to, and participation in, books and other media. This was expressed in a number of ways. Some young people said that they preferred books to those of other media, suggesting that books offered them an active role in their imaginative interpretation of texts. Jane stated her preference for books over films:

I don't think you can ever really feel part of a film but you can always feel part of a book...go on to the story rather than just sitting there in a cinema watching the other people doing things.

(Jane aged 12 years)

Cat highlighted how his own imaginative space was usurped by the visual depiction of the films, taking away his own interpretation of the character, Harry Potter:

Because, em, like you can, when they make the books into a film, normally if it's no made into a film or you've no seen the film, then ye can imagine the character. You can make him up like his hair and his style. But when they go into a film, like I dinnae [don't] like who's playing Harry Potter, so em, like I dinnae want tae [to] put him into my imagination while I'm reading the book but I have tae because that's the way he's been used.

(Cat aged 13 years)

Other young people suggested that they preferred films to books, preferring the visual encounter which offered them an opportunity to extend their understanding of texts:

Cos like when ye're reading, ye can imagine it but like when ye're actually at the film ye see different things that you can't imagine.

(Paul aged 13 years)

A number of young people debated this area, arguing that it depended on the particular cultural product, whether it provided an interpretation that they enjoyed and engaged with. Kevin said 'it depends' while Rhona suggested that books and films were different (both aged 13 years).

One of the defining attributes of a fictional book is that it *is* a story. It is make believe. The assumption is that a fictional text remains, in essence, a fiction, which has at its heart a story conceived, created and committed to a written format. Much weight is given to the author's ability to make a text believable so that readers commit to the fictional world that the author has created. Writers from cross-disciplinary perspectives reflect the dilemma of identifying what is real and what is fictional. As Barthes, a literary theorist, states:

The 'reality' of a sequence lies not in the 'natural' succession of the actions composing it but in the logic there exposed, risked and satisfied.

(Barthes, 1977: 124)

Fictional 'reality' does not have to replicate the sensory completeness of the individual's everyday experience but has to provide a resonance of something that can be rationally understood and accepted. Bruner, from the discipline of developmental psychology, says 'we rarely inquire as to the shape reality is given when we dress it up as story' (2003: 6). We know about the artifice, and that the 'real world is not "really" like this' but we 'cling to narrative models of reality' (Bruner, 2003:7). The reader finds what is 'real' in the text while being aware of its constructed nature. Berger and Luckmann (1967) point out that what is 'real' is linked to 'knowledge'. Aspects of the text are not fictional but draw on occurrences,

places and behaviour that may have a resonance with a reader's own experience or wider understanding of the world. These may cover a number of different aspects of the text. So settings and objects may be familiar. Characters are likely to have recognisable human traits, emotions and actions. Language will reflect common modes of communication. Fiction, after all, needs to be 'credible and believable' in some way (Potter, 1996:3). As David Almond, a children's writer, says in his introduction to his short story collection, *Counting Stars*:

Like all stories, they merge memory and dream, the real and the imagined, truth and lies.

(Almond, 2000, Introduction)

The different interpretations explored in this section are reminders that definitions of what is fictionally and socially 'real' are problematic and complex. Both social scientists and literary theorists, although often reverting to the terms 'real', 'real life', 'reality' and 'realism' to discuss their theoretical positions, are cautious about the language that is used and the difficulty of arriving at firm conceptual definitions. Reality, is not tangible, is not an object but is socially and fictionally constructed. Its meaning is nuanced, depending on influences such as current societal norms and practices and individual and group experiences. Its existence comes about as a result of knowledge; what is real is unknowable unless it has been perceived or experienced. Acceptance of the fictional representation of reality depends on its credibility and acceptability to readers as well as narrative devices and the use of language.

These all have a relevance to this study, suggesting that the realistic qualities of texts may be one kind of proxy for exploring how well adults represent childhood in books. These concepts also highlight that identifying what is real in fiction is challenging. Young people had to answer this question in a number of ways. They had to have a sense of how 'real' was used as a term and concept so that they could reflect on its relevance to books. Young people had to be able to consider its applicability to different kinds of texts and consider if this meant that books were representations of contemporary or recognisable human experiences. They also had to have an understanding of the artifice involved in books in order to identify what

appeared 'real'. Fictional reality, after all, was not a replication of their experiences and knowledge but an interpretation and invention by authors which had to be acceptable to young people's own understanding of the world. Books, or rather the adult writers and mediators of books, therefore had to provide meaningful fictional spaces which resonated with readers' sense of what was real.

'Realistic' childhoods

Young people demonstrated that they had a wide knowledge of different genres such as realism, science fiction, adventure stories and fantasies as well as an understanding of the literary devices used by authors. Some young people, particularly those who read more widely, were more conversant with different kinds of books and reflected this knowledge in interviews. Most of the young people, regardless of their interest in reading, were able to identify fictional forms and discuss their preferences, indicating a high level of awareness of textual forms. Jonathan, talking about the leading character, Alex Rider, in books by Anthony Horowitz, states that young readers do recognise the narrative artifice:

Ye ken [you know] by the stuff that he [Alex Rider] does and stuff that it's meant tae [to] be fiction.

(Jonathan aged 14 years)

Jonathan's and other young people's responses show that readers use their own knowledge to critique the fictional credibility of texts as well as assess the appropriateness of different narrative styles, genres and techniques for conveying fictional representations. All readers use their skills to do this but it can be perceived as more challenging for young readers who may not have the fictional or life history experience of adults. They can be seen to be less accustomed to literary forms and conventions. But this perspective downplays children and young people's skills in interpreting narrative as well as intimating that children's books contain 'dumbed down' approaches to narrative (Hunt, 2005). Viewing children's books as simple is a misjudgement and, according to Hunt, children are 'more competent text-handlers than is generally assumed' (1991:48). Meek (2000) states that even very young children are able to recognise types of story and the particular creative hand of an

author. In line with these other studies, I found that participants were able to identify and critique the different components of texts.

Young people chose between different genres and types of fiction (see Chapter 4). Girls were predominantly interested in books which emphasised a connection with real life with the majority of older girls and just under half of younger girls choosing this option. This was in contrast to over a third of younger boys and a much smaller percentage of older boys. However, other choices such as action, mystery or adventure did not necessarily mean that young people were uninterested in what they saw as fictionally realistic. Many liked a mixture of different genres including those which, in some way, reflected facets of the everyday. Young people confirmed these varied choices in interviews. Kevin stated that he liked ‘fantasy, adventure... some real life ones’ while Julia said that she chose ‘stuff about people’ (Kevin and Julia aged 13 years).

Young people responded to a question about the connections between books and real life in different ways. Some participants described books that could be categorised as belonging to the genre of realism in that they portrayed young people in recognisable situations and were not overtly fantastical in setting, characterisation or plot. These young people, mostly girls, recognised that the books reflected a version of everyday experience, using words such as ‘like’ and ‘sounds’ to emphasise the connection. One girl summarised why she thought books by Jacqueline Wilson were realistic:

It’s just the characters and the way their sentences are made
and the way they talk and how they dress and the things that
happen. It’s like reality.

(Miranda aged 10 years)

Miranda found Wilson’s characterisation, narrative devices and plots to be credible, ‘like reality’. Other young people also indicated that the combination of narrative style and characterisation were important. Stacey thought that books by Catherine MacPhail, which she viewed as being like ‘real life’ and ‘adventurous’, were ‘good at describing young people’ (Stacey aged 13 years). Two girls, discussing why they liked Jacqueline Wilson books, emphasised what they perceived as the reality of the texts. The books were more than just funny stories but also ‘sounded’ realistic:

Jacqueline Wilson's a really good author because she makes
it sound realistic and she doesn't just make up funny stories.
(Kylie aged 10 years)

The implication for Kylie was that being realistic had more value than simply 'funny stories'; the texts had to have more resonances than supposedly light hearted narrative. This perspective was reinforced by several comments from girls, suggesting that they thought that books identified as realistic resonated with their interests more than straightforwardly humorous books. This was in spite of books about 'fun stuff' being popular across age groups and gender in the study. Buckingham (2000) found that young people's views on reality in television were an important way of young people defining their own taste and identity. Girls, for example, dissociated themselves from what they saw as boys' immature choices by suggesting that cartoons were unrealistic (Buckingham, 2000).

Young people identified a number of different components which helped to make a text realistic. The language, including the dialogue, had to be accessible and close to what was viewed as the normal communication style of young people, although it was still defined by the narrative form. The clothing or material possessions and setting had to have a resemblance to the contemporary lives of young people. Young characters had to have qualities and interests that were recognisable as being those of young people. The plot and narrative had to have some connection with everyday events and concerns. Books were regarded as being realistic if they dealt credibly with areas of concern and interest to young people. This included characters being involved in activities that young people recognised as similar to their own lives including routine, everyday occurrences such as going out with friends, shopping and spending time with families. Two girls explained why these kinds of descriptions meant that they liked Jacqueline Wilson's books:

Amy:like before she gets into the story she's like tells ye quite a lot about the people and what they're like and what kind of person they are.
Holly: Tracy Beaker's a good one as well.
Interviewer: Why do you like Tracy Beaker?
Amy: Feels like a real life person like us.

Holly: Cos she's kinda lively but she does kinda things she's not supposed to as well.

(Amy and Holly aged 13 years)

Tracy Beaker in the *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1992) has characteristics that Amy and Holly liked and which they thought they also possessed. Tracy, the fictional girl, is 'lively' and is involved in activities which are not endorsed by adults. The character is interesting and anarchic at the same time but without these attributes being seen as negative. There was an empathetic connection between the fictional characterisation and the two readers' view of themselves. Many of the young people spoke of the character of Tracy Beaker and had watched the television adaptation of the book. Readers' understanding of the character was therefore reinforced by a visual interpretation, emphasising the strong intertextual interpretation of this particular book. As Sophie says about the book, *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (1992):

Sophie: It's funny and it could be like a real story

Interviewer: Why do you think it could be like a real story?

Sophie: Because it's true. Well it seems true...

Interviewer: And you think that Tracy, as a character is quite like a real life person?

Sophie: Absolutely. The TV programmes, I watch them and she's really funny.

(Sophie aged 10 years)

Young people highlighted that books with a 'real life' backdrop often described experiences or events that were seen as problematic. Some focused on areas that are often seen as being commonplace problems for young people such as bullying, families or difficulties with relationships. One young person explained that books can talk about 'difficult things that's happening and that's quite good' (Julia aged 13 years). She included puberty, bullying and being teased as problems that were covered in books that she had read. Speaking about Jacqueline Wilson again she says:

Cos she writes it like it's going to help you and she tells you what to do and stuff and so if you were like having child abuse and you had this book and you were reading it, it might make it...and it makes you feel better, some books, her books.

(Julia aged 13 years)

Some participants said that they had not experienced all the 'real life' problems they encountered in texts. Chambers suggests that culture can foster skills 'to project ahead of ourselves, foreseeing causes and effects before they become active' (1995:3). These readers thought that it might be useful to learn how to deal with problems from books:

I think that books like Catherine MacPhail books and that, it helps ye cos if ye're getting bullied or that, it will help ye deal with bullying. Cos quite a few of her books are like that, and ye know, about accidents and that that's happened in life...if someone's been killed and murdered or been killed in an accident...paralysed or that. And like that might happen to a member of your family and I think that it would help ye to go through it.

(Jessica aged 13 years)

Here Jessica talked about the more mundane and commonplace difficulties that young people might experience, bullying, as well as more extreme or unusual traumatic events such as accidents or murder; both encompassed her view of what was realistic in books. A number of young people talked about gang fighting, with particular reference to a book, *Tribes* by Catherine MacPhail (2002) about a boy who finds himself drawn into undermining the powers of gangs in his area. They intimated that this was not their own experience. Jonathan said:

Like I read *Tribes* and that was like my type of book. Like there was loads of fighting in it but there was like quite a good read as well.

In answer to whether he thought it was realistic, he continued:

Kinda in a way because...no so much now but like when all my mum's and dad's [friends] were like younger, it was like they had their ain [own] gang and like it was kinda like realistic and like pretend.

(Jonathan aged 14 years)

Jonathan distanced himself from gangs but affirmed the fictional draw of the text ('quite a good read as well') and suggested that his parents' generation were more into gangs but that they were not necessarily involved in fighting, a negative activity. Generally, young people did not discuss being involved themselves in behaviour that

is often regarded as being troublesome by adults but several indicated that these descriptions were realistic.

Hardy (1977), writing about past classroom and literacy practices and reflecting on the 'seriousness' of realistic fiction says that as children develop, there is a move away from fantasy to life 'as it is'. Teachers develop their work on the premise:

that we begin with fairy tales and daydreams and gradually
work into realistic modes.

(Hardy, 1977: 13)

According to Hardy, realism becomes a more dominant fiction for older children with fantasy relegated to their younger childhood selves. Hunt and Lenz (2001) too suggest that fantasy is seen to be 'childish'. This is not necessarily a reflection of contemporary books for young people as a significant number of fantasy books were published during the last decade including *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman (2001), the Harry Potter series by J.K Rowling (1998) and the self titled *The Saga of Darren Shan* series by Darren Shan (2000). In spite of this growth in fantasy, books with a focus on social realism are still regarded as having a particular status, providing opportunities for learning about areas which are considered difficult and problematic.

Books which describe illness, death, family breakdown, drugs and sexual activity, are viewed in contradictory ways. Their subject matter is scrutinised by adults in order to assess suitability for young readers. Books with these sub texts are also seen to be a controlled way of exposing young people to illuminating or transitional life experiences. On one hand, young people's access to texts can be restricted or books edited so that young people are protected from experiences and influences which are presumed to be negative. On the other hand, books are seen as tools for moral and social learning. The novel, *Junk* by Melvin Burgess (1997), for example, provoked public debate when it was first published because of its forthright portrayal of young people misusing drugs. It has also, conversely, been read within schools and has been adapted for a television film because of its central theme. It is used as an educational resource as well as being criticised. Hollindale (1997) says that writers such as

Burgess who depict young people in tough environments recognisable to readers can be:

critically praised and yet dismissed by many adults as too controversial, because the approved childness of children's literature is in arrears of current street realities.

(Hollindale, 1997: 87)

Children's books, as Hollindale suggests, do not provide representations of all childhoods, particularly those where young people's behaviour is seen to be deviant or morally unacceptable. They often lag behind what is happening to children in the non-fictional world. Books which give a high profile to young people's sexuality, for example, are not commonplace even though puberty and establishing sexual relationships are a significant part of the experience of adolescence. Censorship plays a role in children's books, suggesting that children are 'impressionable and simple-minded, unable to take a balanced view of, for example, sexual or racial issues' (Hunt, 2005: 6). The connection to everyday realities is strictly delineated by the convention of the fictional form as well as by the overseeing role of adults in the text. However, young people thought that adult restrictions are not always more stringent in books than in other media. One girl said:

because when you're watching it from the TV, some children aren't really allowed to watch it because it's like 15's and 18's and things, but when you're reading it in a book, some books haven't got the little parental guidance thing so you can take your time reading it and you can read it when you want to read it.

(Miranda aged 10 years)

Most of the texts which young people described were also books that were published recently. Readers were interested in contemporary portrayals of childhood. This is in accord with research on young people's reading habits which finds that 'children read the texts of their times' (Meek, 1995:6). Only two young people also mentioned books that were published in the more distant past. Stuart, who read widely across genres and was reading adult as well as young people's fiction, suggested that *To Kill a Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee (2004 [1960]) was also realistic in some ways:

Yeah that had teenagers in it. That was good. I think they did it really well cos I actually felt...I could actually really relate to that, although it was set a few years ago. But there was some sort of the same situations.

(Stuart aged 13 years)

He recognised that the novel was from a previous period but acknowledged that there were elements that he could relate to in spite of the time gap. On the whole, however, young people discussed books that had been published recently, indicating that current fictional representations were more widely available and chosen by young people. There is therefore a mismatch between what young people actually read and older 'classic' texts promoted by adults and often based on their own childhood reading experiences. The codicil would be that some well known older books for children and young people had gained a high profile at the time of the research through television or film adaptations such as *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1968), first published in 1954. This and other recent adaptations, such as *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* from the book by C.S. Lewis (2001), first published in 1950, and the Harry Potter series of films have been fantasy rather than realistic drama. The television serial, *Tracy Beaker*, was an exception mentioned by a significant number of the young people. Young people discussed the Harry Potter films throughout the research, often discussing the cinematic adaptation at the same time as the books, reflecting media literacy adeptness in their analysis of the two different cultural products. Young people rarely use only one medium; they 'can enter textual representations through a variety of portals' (Mackey, 2007: 8).

Some young people were more ambiguous about whether books were adequate representations of young people. As one girl said about the effectiveness of books to describe being young 'Sometimes it does. Sometimes it doesn't.' (Joanne aged 10 years). Others were doubtful that events in books had any relationship to their lives but suggested that these experiences were useful in terms of increasing their understanding about people. One young person, Stuart, distanced himself from the problems that were reflected in books, going so far as to say that he was unlikely to ever have these life challenges:

Some of them go into depth [about] problems that other people face that I never...I might not and probably never will [have] so that gives me an insight into other people's lives. But I'm not sure how accurate that is cos I'm not there.

(Stuart aged 13 years)

Fictional portrayals were not wholly convincing. One girl, when asked if Jacqueline Wilson books were good at talking about real life said 'no' emphatically, drawing on her own experience. In this instance, *The Story of Tracy Beaker* (Wilson, 1992), about the adventures of a young person who lived in institutional care, was seen to be merely humorous:

Leanne: No. Cos like Tracy Beaker, that's just humorous.

Interviewer: So you don't think it's really like what it's like to be in a children's home?

Leanne: My wee sister's in a home.

Interviewer: But you don't think it's like Tracy Beaker books?

Leanne: No.

(Leanne aged 13 years)

Leanne's knowledge of what it was like to be in care did not match the fictional representation. It was not real. Other young people had different reactions. One girl did not like what she saw as the overt realism of *Looking for JJ* (Cassidy, 2005) about a young person who had been convicted of a child murder. She found the lead character, JJ, a 'bit hopeless':

I prefer people that were...probably more confident because I'm not that confident and I don't really like it if people are really confident and make friends really easily and everything. So I like someone just in between.

(Jane aged 12 years)

Jane wanted a book to reflect a different kind of experience. She sought books that made her feel comfortable rather than ones which appeared to mirror her own feelings or were portrayals of very confident characters.

Young people also asserted that books which were realistic had to be well produced fiction so good stories, characterisation, humour and description were important. Two boys were in agreement in their paired interview that books which aimed to

reflect common concerns were often mundane. One said that he did think that books could potentially help with a wider understanding of the world but that if the focus was on 'problems' the text lost out:

Kinda. Like well some books are about [about] racism, some about sexist...kinda, It just reminds you what you already ken [know] like racism books are alright but if it just keeps going on about racism and racism and racism ...it gets boring
(Paul aged 13 years)

They both agreed that a book needed to have a good story. A factually accurate approach was not adequate; neither was a book which pushed a moral message at the expense of the story. Books which adults might think were socially realistic in a positive way were not attractive to young people unless they had wider fictional attributes and were more closely linked to their interests.

On the other hand, young people indicated that a mono representation of childhood was inappropriate. What was likely to be compelling to some young people was not of interest to others. Jane, who was uncertain about the characterisation in *Looking for JJ* (Cassidy, 2005), was also clear that authors who assumed that girls were going to be interested solely in make-up and boyfriends were misdirected:

Well, a lot of people that write for teenagers they write these stories about, don't know, make-up, boyfriends and everything and I think that they're not very realistic. Maybe they're only realistic to the kind of people that wouldn't actually read books, that aren't very interested in reading or something like that. So, I don't know. I don't think many books are really like what a young person's like.

She goes onto say:

Yeah. I think people quite often think either expect you to be more immature or more mature. They never get quite exactly what's right at that age.

(Jane aged 12 years)

For Jane, books which focused outside her area of interest such as 'make-up, boyfriends and everything' indicated a misrepresentation of young people's interests. This was not a majority view as some girls indicated that they did like books which

covered these and other activities. Although a particular kind of gendered depiction did appeal to many girl readers in the study, it did not suit all girls. This is explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

Young people identified events or situations that were realistic in books. They suggested that some were aligned with their own experiences while others, while recognisable as being part of the panoply of human life, were not. Some stated that reading about such situations helped young people to deal with them more effectively, providing a learning experience about dealing with difficult areas of childhood and adulthood, a role that adults often attribute to children's books. There was also some scepticism about whether books were good at describing childhood with young people highlighting instances where authors had been less successful. This area would benefit from further study in order to find out whether young people expected certain childhood experiences to be omitted in books, based on a view that adults censor descriptions of human experience when presenting them to children. What is 'realistic' in texts operates in a regulated space, defined by adults. Young people in turn make critical assessments about what they read, drawing on their experiences of narratives devices and fictional types to refine their expectations of texts.

I began this chapter by indicating that 'real life' was used as a 'proxy' to explore the reflections of young people on the adult representations they encounter. However, using this concept, also allowed for another kind of discussion about the spaces that stories offer. This imaginative territory was obviously available through the 'realistic' fictions that young people accessed.

'Fantasy' childhoods

Books which were predominantly realistic and which fitted nominally into the genre of realism were only one type of book which young people saw as having a resonance with their own interests and experience. Young people also noted that books based around fantasy (the overtly 'unreal') could offer both real and fantastical spaces. In interviews young people identified 'fantasy' as the counterpoint to texts which were regarded as realistic in setting, plot and characterisation. Books which

were viewed as being fantastical were also seen as being able to reflect aspects of human experience and could therefore be realistic. As noted in the previous section, Hardy (1977) suggests that books which have a focus on real life are often seen by adults to be more appropriate for older children and young people, providing a textual focus for equipping young people to deal with their everyday lives. This suggests that fantasy books are positioned differently and are seen to have less relevance to children's life worlds. They lie, according to this viewpoint, within the realm of the imaginary, rather than providing a fictional reference point for the experience of young people. However, this is an adult perspective. In order to explore further whether books provide credible representations of the experiences and interests of young people, this section considers young people's views on books which were seen to have fantastical narratives.

Young people's reflections on the relationship between books, real life and fantasy could be distinguished as being based around three particular viewpoints. Some found that the lack of obvious reality in books that were fantastical did not interest them. They wanted to read books that they perceived were more representative of young people's experiences. Many of these readers were girls, in line with Buckingham's (2000) findings that girls aim to assert their maturity in the face of 'unrealistic' texts on television. Others liked books that bridged a depiction of the everyday with the fantastical. They wanted to read stories that they found believable. A final group relished the adventures that fantasy books could offer and thought that these books had possibilities not offered by stories which were more realistic. Most young people indicated that books had to have a semblance of reality about them to make them acceptable to readers although as one boy cryptically put it when describing the Darren Shan (Shan, 2000) vampire fuelled series of books:

Like ye dinnae [don't] see people getting turned into
vampires and that.

(Cat aged 13 years)

Cat did however go onto describe how there were some elements of the books that were realistic in some way although he felt the plot was not.

A number of young people were reluctant to read fantasy books. One young person, who was a keen reader, indicated that he did not enjoy books that were fantastical, preferring the real and 'down to earth':

Interviewer: Do you like books that have a relationship to everyday life?

Stuart: Well, as long as there's some relationship and it's not just...I hate fantasy

Interviewer: And you don't like sci-fi?

Stuart: Anything that's realistic down to earth

Interviewer: There's something you can relate to? You like something that...

Stuart: Could happen.

(Stuart aged 13 years)

For Stuart, plausibility and credibility in fiction were essential and this could only be met by books which were not fantasy. Several young people acknowledged that they liked the mix of the fantastical and the realistic but suggested that there were limits to the amount of fantasy they liked in their texts. When asked if she liked fantasy books, Stephanie said that she did not like them 'because they're a bit too like pretending. I don't like pretending'. However, she went on to concede that she liked certain books which were more recognisably fantastical although there were limits to her interest:

Mmm. I like certain ones but I think that some of them go a bit too far in some of the books. But I still like kinda real life but not too much fantasy. Dinnae [don't] understand it really.

(Stephanie aged 13 years)

Another reader, Jane, confirmed that she liked fantasy books. Again, she wanted to experience a fictional 'different world' but one which was in touch with her notion of what was realistic in books:

Jane: I quite like fantasy books, yeah. Not too fantasy. Not too much fantasy. More real life fantasy books

Interviewer: Real life fantasy books. People have said that to me and that means what? That means not as extreme as science fiction?

Jane: Yeah. Not as extreme as that or something that's maybe... in a different world where things are different but then there's a lot of similarities.

(Jane aged 12 years)

This resonates with Spufford's comment, in his book on childhood reading, on books which have 'a tincture of this world's reality' but take place in other worlds (2002:85). Some young people suggested that fantasy books provided excitement, adventure and possibilities that are not present in those which described more everyday, and perhaps mundane, experiences. When asked if he thought 'realistic' books were good at describing young people, Jonathan was emphatic that they were not:

Jonathan: No for our age they're no'

Interviewer: Why don't you think they're realistic?

Jonathan: Cos like they tend... like people our age are like wanting adventure. They aren't [are not] wanting realistic stuff like ...unless they're like quite sad in a way. Like they're wanting fiction.

(Jonathan aged 14 years)

He goes on to say that 'realistic facts' take 'all the fun out [out] of it'. Jonathan interpreted this question as being whether young people liked realistic books. He did not want to read books set in a recognisable everyday setting and viewed these books as being dull and unadventurous. Jonathan wanted books which provided adventure and were 'funny like a spoof'. This perspective was reflected in several responses with boys in particular talking about their desire for adventure in books. Books associated with 'real life' were seen as more for girls and were somewhat scorned (see Chapter 7).

Other readers also suggested that they liked books which had a fantastical quality about them but which remained grounded in some way with young people's reading identities. One boy discussed books in the Alex Rider series by Anthony Horowitz which he acknowledged as having fantastical elements but which were also realistic:

Charlie: Some of it's a wee bit far-fetched but it's quite realistic.

Interviewer: In what way is it realistic?

Charlie: It's not like *The Series of Unfortunate Events* - made up things. It's real like this one's made like in Cuba and the one before, he's [Anthony Horowitz] been to the French Alps

and down in Cornwall and he gets in all sorts of dangers and he wants to have a normal life as a teenager but M16 keep calling him up. One time he went, the first time he went down to Cornwall, and he came back and about three weeks later they needed him again to go and solve this thing in the French Alps, at this academy .

(Charlie aged 11 years)

The setting of the books, places that exist and that have been visited by the author, provides an anchor for the credibility of the reader while also giving him a way to enter into imaginative spaces. Charlie compares the book with the fantastical series of books, *The Series of Unfortunate Events* by Lemony Snicket (2001), which he does not see as realistic. He goes on to talk about how he imagines himself in the book, *Skeleton Key* (Horowitz, 2004) and then the Harry Potter books:

Charlie: I can... sometimes I can look through the eyes of the characters and think of what its like and sometimes I can just picture what some place looks like but really I know that they're going to look like that because we went to this book fair and Anthony Horowitz said and all his stories where he set them. He actually went to the place. I know he never went to the French Alps and that was kind of made up but he went underneath the tennis courts at Wimbledon where a fight [is] set in *Skeleton Key*.

Interviewer: And do you think that makes them more real then? Or do you think it makes them better to read?

Charlie: It makes them more real because he's been there and he's seen what it's like so and then he writes it down. You get closer to seeing what it's really like instead of just like some of the time you picture something straight away.

Interviewer: Have any of the same kind of things ever happened to you or can you see things that are a bit like your life in books?

Charlie: Kind of. Harry Potter because it's ...he does go about with his friends and that but sometimes I keep thinking about Harry Potter. I wonder what it would be like to [to be] say, not magic like, [in a] a sort of boarding school...I keep imagining myself in that. It sounds a bit weird but I like it. It was like seeing this 50 storey building with all these moving stairs. It's amazing.

(Charlie aged 11 years)

This section of interview reveals layers of what Charlie viewed as imaginary interwoven with what he saw as real. He talked of settings for the novel which

existed. He might have seen the Alps and Wimbledon on television or in the cinema. He acknowledged the fictional devices and artifice. He also connected with the author, Anthony Horowitz, whom he had seen at a children's book festival event recounting how he had researched the book, *Skeleton Key*. These aspects made the book more credible for Charlie. He then goes on to talk about Harry Potter. Harry goes about with his friends, an activity that Charlie recognised as one in which he participated. But the book also took him to imaginary places. He considered what it would be like to attend Hogwarts, the school in Harry Potter. School implies a number of real life experiences in tune with Charlie's own but this school is different; it is magic. Placing himself in the setting of the books, Charlie suggests that he had visually seen the stairs in the schools, indicating that he has both read the book and seen the film. This is confirmed later in the interview. In his encounters with different texts written by two authors, there are layers of credibility and encounter which add to the sense of reality as well as providing fictional spaces that are filled in by his imagination.

Charlie sees fantasy and realism as interwoven. However, those writing or talking about children's books can separate these different approaches to storytelling, seeing them as oppositional depictions rather than as different interpretations of the fictionally credible and incredible. Stephens (1992) states that an adult urge to polarise fantasy and realism in children's literature criticism is based partly on a notion that realism is seen to be serious (and therefore high status) while fantasy is not. One form of fiction is then viewed as 'better' than the other. But there are contradictions in adults' views. In spite of the supposedly negative attribute given to particular 'unrealistic' texts, there has been a significant growth in fantasy books during the last decade which suggests that a viewpoint that only realistic books are serious is only partially accurate. In recent years, authors, publishers and educationalists have recognised that fantasy is highly popular among readers and have produced many books in this category of stories. The success of a plethora of books, many in series form, such as the Harry Potter series (Rowling, 1998), *His Dark Materials* (Pullman, 2001), *The Saga of Darren Shan* series (Shan, 2001), the extensive work of Diane Wynne Jones and *The Wind on Fire* trilogy (Nicholson,

2000) indicate a greater acceptability of this genre. These books have been popular with both children and adults. However, Julia Eccleshare, Children's Fiction Editor at *The Guardian* newspaper, gives another possible reason for the popularity of fantasy books:

We don't seem to be allowed to write about children in the real world perhaps because children (today) are more policed, monitored and controlled than at any other time. You cannot have reality in fiction when children are not allowed to do anything.

(Eccleshare reported in Gourlay, 2006)

Eccleshare's comments suggest that adult writers (and their editors and publishers) perceive that there are restrictions on what they can write about for children. There is a difference between the depiction of childhood in books which are regarded as realistic and those that are fantastical. A protective view of children is not just restricted to 'real world' policies and services. It is also present in cultural products for young people such as books.

Adult concern about realism in books echoes a running theme in this thesis, an ambiguity and tension in how childhood is seen by adults and how this viewpoint is then manifested across the different spheres of childhood. The perception that children and young people are regarded as requiring protection because of their vulnerability is commonplace. It results in greater scrutiny by adults of young people's activities with the ensuing fewer opportunities for young people to assert their own agency. If children and young people are not allowed to have a life away from surveillance and adult authority in the everyday world, how can books tell stories about young characters that are adventurous, undertake risks and push boundaries?

Eccleshare's comments point to an uncertainty in adults about what is acceptable in books for young people, suggesting that fantasy is seen as a safer haven for authors and publishers precisely because the dissonance between 'real life' and the text is less obvious (Gourlay, 2006). This is reflected in other media too. Buckingham, writing about policy discourse around television's relationship to children, finds that

there is a 'complex balance between the fear of doing harm (a protectionist discourse) and the attempt to do children good (a pedagogical discourse)' (2008: 228). He suggests that both are related to wider understandings of childhood. This suggests a general cautiousness about fictional representations which are seen to be 'realistic' in their qualities. Fantasy books are seen to be 'safer' because they do not have to be so overtly connected to the experience of young people. Shying away from realism because of difficulties depicting the everyday is, of course, an adult perspective.

As this chapter's findings have shown, young people did not suggest that they read fantasy fiction because of their concerns about realistic fiction's depictions of the risky areas of young people's lives. Instead many young people said that they proactively choose fantasy fiction for its imaginative and fictional qualities as well as revelling in the 'otherness' of these types of books. They did not view fantasy books as simply being a retreat from the 'real'. These texts provided particular kinds of stories which they enjoyed. But young people did have different perspectives on how to categorise the two genres. Some viewed fantasy as being either the antithesis of realistic texts while others saw fantasy as being placed along a continuum of realistic representations.

Returning to the comments of Eccleshare (Gourlay, 2006) and Buckingham (2008) on the restrictions and boundaries that are applied to different cultural products, the way in which childhood is understood appears to influence texts with fantasy providing fictional spaces which can be less contentious and less risky. Books which are fantastical provide opportunities for young characters to embark on adventures that are otherwise not credible, or even acceptable in realistic texts. But books, whatever genre, do not replicate the experience of contemporary or past childhoods. They can both limit as well as extend the possibilities of childhood representation through storytelling. What young people thought about the ways in which fictional childhoods are portrayed is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 6 The autonomous child

We need kids who have thirst for a bit of excitement. The things that get you into trouble in the outside world are the sort of qualities we look for here.

From *The Recruit* by Robert Muchamore (2004: 67)

Children and young people rarely have roles which are powerful or influential in society. They are disempowered socially, economically, politically and culturally with a fragmented recognition of their skills and competences by adults. This is due to their position as children rather than any assessment of their expertise. As citizens-in-waiting, they do not have the status that is ascribed to adulthood. This emphasises the dominant and pervasive perspective that children and young people are expected to learn how to be adults rather than take on significant roles in society.

As they move through the transitional experiences of childhood, there are more opportunities for young people to gain greater independence. However, significant life choices are all skewed to the upper end of childhood, the point at which physical and emotional maturity is regarded as being developmentally achieved. Until then, children and young people are seen to be dependent human beings and subject to the authority of adults at home, in school and the other places of childhood.

In direct contradiction of these perspectives, children's books often present fictional children and young people in more powerful roles. In these positions, child characters have responsibilities and tasks that can be unknown or unacknowledged in contemporary childhood. This is a narrative device but it is also a particular and accepted component of books for children and young people. This chapter explores whether the depictions of child characters provide alternative representations of childhood that are not dominant in society and young people's responses to these representations. It analyses what young people said about the ways in which young characters are represented in books, exploring their views on the child characters that they liked and what they saw as the competences of these characters.

The responsible child

In previous chapters, I identified the limitations that are accrued to children and young people because of adult constructions of childhood. So although children and young people are increasingly seen as social agents, the dominant discourse is that they are human becomings. Childhood is seen as ‘a structured process of becoming, but rarely as a course of action or a coherent social practice’ (Jenks, 2005:8). In turn, the experience of childhood is bounded because of these constructions, Kline’s (1993) ‘walled garden’ protecting children in their supposedly innocent state from the wider world. The experience of childhood becomes an overly protected space as well as a restrictive environment. Constructing childhood in these ways has a number of consequences for how childhood is regarded and how children and young people experience this overseen part of the life course.

This extends to children and young people’s engagement with texts. Young people’s need for imaginative places to explore their lives is seen to be different by virtue of their childhood status. Starting in childhood, stories of others can link to the stories of self (Zahavi, 2007). According to Hollindale (1997), books hold a special purpose in exploring what it means to be a child and how that changes as a young person develops, both in ‘real life’ and through the artifice of the fictional world.

Hollindale’s (1997) view should not be unchallenged if it is based on an adult centric view of books having ascendancy over other forms of culture for children and young people, attributing a specialness to books because of their particular moral, educational and social worth. On the other hand, fictional texts have several elements which are more consistently present than in other cultural products. Television, films and computer games, for example, do not necessarily place young people as characters at the centre in the same way as books. This was highlighted in the study by some young people when discussing different media. As Jane said:

There’s a lot of films that adults...that are all adults in them but young people do go to see. But there’s not many films with actual children in and that are good.

(Jane aged 12 years)

Even in adaptations of children's books for the screen, young characters can, to some extent, become sidelined. Film adaptations of children's books, for example, profile the leading adult characters and the actors playing these roles more overtly than in the original books where the young characters are predominant. There is perceptively a shift in attention in these other forms of media away from the young characters towards the adult. But this high profile is not only the choice of adult producers. Young people also are looking forward and are reluctant to stay in the 'presentness' of childhood, choosing cultural products that might be seen to be for adults. A significant number of young people in the study declared their interest in films and television programmes which were for adults or had adult characters in them. Very few programmes specifically targeted at children or young people were mentioned by participants in interviews with the majority indicating that they watched programmes which were also for adult audiences such as soap operas and sports coverage. As Kylie said:

Like when you reach the age of 10 or 11, you want to get into more serious films like adult ones so I think children's ones are getting a bit too silly. You understand what's happening. Not when you're like three years old and believed in Santa and Barbie and stuff.

(Kylie aged 11 years)

Making these textual choices was, according to Kylie, a sign of maturity. Buckingham's (2000) findings illustrate that Kylie's interests fit the norm of viewing habits. He states that media for adults is increasingly accessed by young people. They are interested in books and other representations of childhood and young adulthood which are in advance of their own experience. As readers, they are also interested in characters that are depicted in ways that are appropriate to their age, attentive to where authors are both more and less successful in creating credible fictional children and young people

Books generally have fictional children and young people at the centre of their narratives. Young people, however, pointed out that there were qualitative differences in portrayals of young characters in stories. Several commented that some authors were more effective at describing characters and therefore childhood

than others. They thought that authors did not always describe young people's lives adequately:

Iain: I think some authors forget what it is to be like a child
and just make it up

Julius: And it disnae [doesn't] really make sense.

(Iain and Julius aged 13 years)

According to Iain and Julius, adult authors had become detached and distant from their own childhoods. These authors had to draw on their imaginations rather than base their representations on what Iain and Julius thought was, more accurately, the experience of being young. Jane thought that authors did not always give young people the recognition and skills that they should have:

It's the ones where they sort of underestimate teenagers. It's
really annoying.

(Jane aged 12 years)

These statements show that young people were aware of the variety of fictional childhoods that were available to them in texts. The way that child characters are portrayed can reflect dominant, minority or emergent attitudes about childhood. Young characters are created by authors who draw on their own and wider societal perspectives of childhood as well as their understanding of what children and young people like. They are produced by adults and not by children.

Authors are also influenced by other adults, such as publishers, the media, education professionals and parents, and their views of both childhood and books. In turn, young readers engage with texts and construct their own readings, subject to all these influences as well as those of their peers and that of other cultural products for children (Appleyard, 1994; Bearne, 2003a; Benton, 2005; Hourihan, 1997; Mackey, 2007). How child characters are described therefore reveals an intricate combination of how children are regarded in society, what adults and young people would like children to be like, as well as the demands that are placed on fictional roles in order to meet the requirements of the story.

Generally, young people were highly aware of the authors behind the books and had views on how effective they were in telling stories and describing young people and

this is explored in more detail in Chapter 7. Talking about characters in the books was therefore not always separate from an awareness of the presence of the author:

Her [Catherine MacPhail] characters are like the best cos like they're all good people. And it's like everybody's like got something similar to what's happened to them.

(Jonathan aged 14 years)

Although there are different understandings of childhood in children's books, there is an authorial position which can empower the child character. However, a view of authors as sympathetic power givers and deconstructionists of views of childhood which render children voiceless should not be wholly accepted. Authors, while gifting enhanced powers to child characters, can also censor particular activities (Hunt, 2005). Young people too critique these representations as inadequate. Kevin, in his interview, is critical about what he sees as the misrepresentation in books and in television and films of young people:

Quite a few teenagers do swear. Yes, they do like these things. But in our lives, like...they [authors] just make up a bunch of random garbage and it's like 'I like this because it's fun'. It's like 'no'. I mean in little kiddies' books like where the character's 14, for some strange reason, he wants to play with like a new laser blaster toy that lights up and goes wheee...

He goes on to say:

If someone was to go around 'OK, this is my life' and film it. It wouldn't be a U. It wouldn't be a PG. It would be at least 12A, especially walking round the streets. So for something to be actually realistic, it has to be, like what's it...can't remember the word, eh more risky.

(Kevin aged 13 years)

Kevin is clear that adult writers can produce an orderly and cleansed version of childhood which does not match either the forthright language or experiences of a young person. This authorial role can diminish the maturity and agency of the reader; Kevin's description of the fictional 14 year old playing with his 'laser blaster toy'. The ambiguous position of adult producers is, as we have seen, a common theme in writings on children's books and childhood (Hollindale, 1997; Rose, 1993).

Hollindale (1997) also suggests that adult writers rarely have straightforward textual conversations with their readers:

without filtering their adulthood through a protective gauze,
however thin, and making allowance for children's social,
emotional and linguistic inexperience.

(Hollindale, 1997:10)

Adults are writing for a non-peer audience but Hollindale also suggests that there are limitations to their success in appealing to readers because of the lack of 'willingness to accord childhood a status, a value, an experiential uniqueness, in its own right' (1997:10). Adult authors, even if this is done reluctantly, may find they have to balance protection with empowerment, although they may, on balance, be more ready to support the independence of their child characters. The spaces of children's books are not immune from the highly governed nature of childhood that Rose says is prevalent (Rose, 1989). He suggests that our 'thoughts, feelings and actions may appear as the very fabric and constitution of the intimate self' but in fact they are micro managed and organised by the structures of our society (1989:1). Hunt (2001) too emphasises that children's books are partly about control, mirroring how society would like to be seen as well as more subconsciously what it is actually like (Hunt, 2001). Books are not value free nor do they reflect radically different interpretations of childhood than those outside the spaces of fiction. So writers are not oblivious to the influences of the world they live in. They respond to constructions of childhood which are commercially and culturally constructed and are not disingenuous about how they portray children and young people (Hunt, 2001). They take particular perspectives on childhood and use them to develop characters and narrative.

Young people as readers were not unaware of these fictional constraints with some readers articulating their disappointment at the portrayals of characters or other aspects of the text. However, other readers identified fictional young people that they liked and with whom they felt empathy. An alternative depiction of childhood cannot therefore automatically be found in children's books by virtue of their *for* children qualities.

Constructing child characters

How characters are depicted in books is shaped by the genre and style of the text so the focus of this chapter creates some challenges by looking at what young people think about characters separate from plot and setting. Bruner cautions that character is ‘an extraordinary elusive literary idea’ and ‘even in “real life”, it is a moot question whether the actions of persons should be attributed to circumstances or to their “enduring dispositions” – their character’ (1986: 37-38). Separating out character, setting and action is therefore difficult. How to construe a character is an important step in dealing with another person and makes the act of trying to understand a person, ‘whether fiction or in life – inherently dramatic’ (Bruner, 1986: 37). This helps to clarify why I found asking young people about the characters they liked a complex question with some finding it easier to respond to a question about characters than others. This cannot be simply attributed to the fact that some young people were keener readers or due to the skill of authors in developing strong characters. It is also, returning to Bruner’s point, because it is a subtle process to separate character from the other elements that contribute to the story. For some young people, the concept of closely relating to a main character was therefore not so important:

I kind of go off them and then back on them like it depends on what they’re doing throughout the book but it changes a lot.

(Ruby aged 13 years)

Ruby was an enthusiastic reader who also read books for adults as well as those for young people so she was able to draw on her extensive reading experience. She goes on to describe the kind of attributes that she found attractive in characters:

Mainly funny ones and the ones that can actually have [a] laugh and stand up for each other.

(Ruby aged 13 years)

Other young people were more circumspect in identifying a particular character that they liked:

I don't know...I think they're all pretty all much the same really.

(Jessica aged 13 years)

When asked what attributes Jessica would like the character to have, she wanted 'him to be like adventurous and like funny'. Jessica described characters that she liked in the context of other narratives. Talking about a book, *Tribes* by Catherine MacPhail (2002), she says that is 'the way he (sic) uses them [characters]' that she liked. So although some young people could not identify a named character, they could describe some characteristics that they appreciated.

Other young people very clearly identified characters they enjoyed:

I like Darren Shan and I like Steve but he's a baddy but like he suits the storyline.

(Cat, boy aged 13 years)

I like April in *Dustbin Baby*¹³. She's really good. And I like Damien or something, whatever his name is, in *Blood Pressure*¹⁴. That's really good.

(Stephanie aged 13 years)

Cat and Stephanie named characters they liked but also saw these fictional beings as being part of the fabric of the text in keeping with the demands of the story. On the whole, the characters that young people wanted to talk about were in books that they were currently reading or had just read. These were nearly always characters who were children or young people although typically many of the characters that young people liked were slightly older than themselves, returning again to the view that children and young people like to engage with media which portrays older childhoods and young adulthoods. A small number of the older and keener readers who were reading books for adults also indicated that they sometimes liked adult characters as well as those that were younger:

Children mostly. Like teenagers but sometimes they're adults.

(Rhona aged 13 years)

Yeah, like in *Hitchhikers Guide*¹⁵ – Marvin, the paranoid android. I also read Ian Rankin's [books]. My favourite in that was Inspector Rebus. And I'm trying to think in the *His Dark Materials*¹⁶, one by Philip Pullman, Will. I don't really pick favourites often.

(Kevin aged 13 years)

Some young people acknowledged that young characters took on adult roles but were still like young people in their presentation. One boy talked about two boy detectives in *The Falcon's Malteser* by Anthony Horowitz (2002):

I think it makes it more interesting than having like men because sometimes when there's adults as the characters, sometimes they make up...they have more difficult words to understand because they're like more mature and that and they have better grammar and vocabulary and all of that. But when they're children, they just say normal words like we would and it's easier to understand and you manage to follow the story better.

(Charlie aged 11 years)

For this reader, the use of the child characters built empathy, enabling the story to be appropriately pitched at his age group. The central characters were empowered to take on traditional adult roles but retained their linguistic connection with being young.

Some characters were described by young people with an added visual knowledge drawn from film versions of the texts. This was particularly the case with Harry Potter where several young people discussed the book and film interpretation of characters, sometimes highlighting a mismatch between their reading of the text and their interpretation of the film. Talking of his disappointment at the depiction of the cinematic Harry Potter, one boy said:

...expect him to be like somebody like quite cool and like that. No like... ken [know] like he's sorta a geek.

(Jonathan aged 14 years)

In Jonathan's imagination, Harry Potter had been a high status 'cool' young person. However, Harry Potter played by the actor in the film becomes a less superior character, a 'geek' and therefore of lower status. The visual representation of film removed the impact of the imaginative creation.

The characters that young people chose to talk about revealed a small rather than extensive list of characters, drawn from a similarly small range of books. This was generally the findings from the research: young people were reading and were interested in reading but the responses showed that many were reading a small range of authors. This might have been due to the formulation of the research questions or because young people had forgotten about books they had read some time previously. It may have been the case that some books were easier to talk about, perhaps because young people had read more books by this author, or had come to know a character through reading series fiction such as the Harry Potter or Alex Rider books. Many young people had built up a picture of a character over several readings and, sometimes, re-reading experiences.

The most common characters chosen by young people came from books by Anthony Horowitz (the Alex Rider series of books), J.K Rowling (the Harry Potter books) and Jacqueline Wilson. These writers were most consistently mentioned among the young people and also reflected gendered readings; Anthony Horowitz for boys and Jacqueline Wilson for girls with Rowling's books popular with boys and girls (see Chapter 7). Some young people read books by particular authors regardless of their gender. In addition, books by these authors were read by both the younger and older age groups. Other books, characters and authors were also mentioned but these came, on the whole, from individual readers or where a class or book group had been reading a particular text at the time of the interviews. So in one school, for example, the book group had been reading books by Catherine MacPhail and Alan Gibbons and therefore many of the young people in this group mentioned these writers.

It was also the case that young people picked characters from books that were published recently. Characters in 'classic' children's books were not mentioned in answer to this question and generally had a low profile among the young people.

This was consistently the case during the research study with only a few mentions of well known ‘classic’ novels. Benton’s (1995a; 1995b) survey found that what young people read in the early 1990s was different to a similar survey undertaken in the early 1970s (Whitehead et al, 1977). Comparing Benton’s study to this research, only a few books and authors in Benton’s extensive lists for two different teenage groups were mentioned by young people in this study. These included well known novels such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee (2004 [1960]) and *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien (1937) as well as Enid Blyton’s Famous Five series and books by Roald Dahl, Anne Fine and Terry Pratchett. Young people related to texts which were recent, where there was some knowledge about the author and where the book linked with other current products for children and young people such as film or television. As has been found throughout this study, young people read across several media rather than reading one media (Mackey, 2007).

The fact that the books were published recently also suggests that the depiction of children and young people was more current, in line with young people’s concerns and interests. The books ranged in style and genre. Even where the books were adventures or fantasy, young people identified elements which were relevant to their lives, often subverted in their use to meet the needs of the plot. Two boys, commenting on the Alex Rider books, identified particular things that they obviously related to in the books which bridged the gap between the fictional text and their experience:

Adam: They’re my favourite – Anthony Horowitz books. It’s really like... normally spy books wouldnae [wouldn’t] really, would be seeming to be to far fetched, but that... that’s made so real, it’s unbelievable

Interviewer: What do you think is real about it?

Adam: It’s everything. Like all the gadgets and that. It’s original stuff but made into gadgets and that. For example, in *Stormbreaker*¹⁷ there’s a Gameboy colour which is transformed into like you get free game cartridges which, em ...like releases bombs and stuff like that.

(Adam aged 11 years)

Jack added to Adam’s comments:

He's, Anthony Horowitz, has made up a really good character in him. There's just something about him. And he even describes his clothes. Like an Aranna shirt with a wooden bead necklace and blonde hair hanging over his eyes and stuff. Just sounds like your average school kid but he's really special as well.

(Jack aged 11 years)

The first boy, Adam, identified that the role of a current and high value consumer product for young people, a Gameboy, is used as a 'gadget' in the spy story. The second mentioned a designer shirt which the lead character wears. For these readers, the product placement anchors the books in reality by building a connection between the reader and the text. Both boys acknowledged the specialness of the character, Alex Rider, above and beyond the trappings of a normal young consumer.

Some young people were more responsive to characters that were not in the leading role but were still significant in the novel. This was particularly the case in the Harry Potter books which appeared, more than other books, to have strong secondary characters which were mentioned by young people. Hermione and Ron, the best friends of Harry Potter, were discussed by a number of readers, both boys and girls, with their more everyday characteristics being appreciated. Gemma said that she liked Hermione because:

Cos like she's mair [more] funny than Harry or Ron and she's mair stuck up.

(Gemma aged 13 years)

While Adam preferred Ron:

I'd say Ron cos he's a bit stupid and bit funny. Cos he's not really... he's no very bright but sometimes he can be quite brave and sometimes he can't.

(Adam aged 11 years)

The intimation is that these characters are more ordinary than the extraordinary Harry Potter but there is something appealing about their depiction with being funny as the common trait. Girls were generally more reticent about identifying and describing characters that they liked. Some identified characteristics rather than a particular character. Some girls were less interested in stories which were particularly fantastical preferring it to stick closer to a depiction of 'real life' as was

shown by the questionnaire results. These gendered choices are explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

Returning to Bruner (1986), it is difficult to separate out the different components that contribute to an interpretation of characters in books. Other media, the role of authors, the genre or type of books and fictional characteristics all played a part in young people's reaction to child characters. The findings suggest that young people's interpretation of character was an interactive rather than passive process. Young people did not simply accept child characters but sought to find their own meaning in the depictions they encountered.

Competences of young characters

What then are some of the competences of young characters in books? In different narrative genres, characters depicting children and young people can emerge as full blown heroes with traditional Aristotelian heroic virtues. Marsh and Millard identify 'superheroes' as 'generally individualistic and alienated from the everyday society they seek to protect' (2000:51). The more domestic 'real life' stories enable young characters to have attributes which are assumed to have more in common with young people's lives. Young people identified these differences. Louise and Tilly, together talking about a character, Chloe, in a Jacqueline Wilson (2002) book *Sleepovers*, a 'real life' story said:

Interviewer: If you're describing her as a friend, what kind of thing do you think she'd be like?

Louise: She's playful and she's active and always wanting to do things. She doesn't like...

Tilly: She won't sit in the house all the time, just sit and watch telly. She's more like always wanting to go out shopping and out playing... like me

Interviewer: So do you think she's like someone in real life then?

Tilly: Yeah

Interviewer: So that is why you like her because...?

Tilly: Because she's like me. I don't like sitting and watching the telly. I like going out playing my friends and everything like that.

(Tilly and Louise aged 10 years)

The girls, Tilly and Louise, saw the character Chloe as having similar attributes to themselves, with an independence and energy that they too claimed. Chloe was competent and active, engaged in the world outside the home. This normality coupled with the characteristics of friendliness, being funny, dealing with difficult situations or problems and sometimes being a bit naughty or troubled were ones mentioned variously by girl readers who discussed Jacqueline Wilson's books:

Kylie: Jacqueline Wilson's a really good author because she makes it sound realistic and she doesn't just make up funny stories. She makes good characters and stuff

Interviewer: And why do you think she's realistic?

Kylie: Because she writes about children from this age. She doesn't write about like bunnies and rabbits and stuff. She just writes about girls and boys and stuff.

(Kylie aged 11 years)

Again, relationships, credibility and humour were important to Kylie. She also indicated that Jacqueline Wilson writes about 'this age' and is therefore up to date and does not diminish her readers by writing about 'stuff' which would be seen as too young and patronising, the 'bunnies and rabbits' of her comments. Wilson was consistently praised by girl readers for her skill in describing characters and the circumstances that they confront. Many named a particular character with whom they identified. The attraction of Jacqueline Wilson's books for girls is explored in more detail in Chapter 7.

Some young people described characters in counterpoint to themselves. These depictions added to their descriptions of themselves; what Cavarero (2000) would call their 'narratable selves'. Scott compared Alex Rider in the Anthony Horowitz series with his friend, Cat. According to Scott, Alex the character is selfish, focused, a perfectionist and moody. The intimation is that he has some positive characteristics but also some negative ones. He would not therefore be a good match with his friend, Cat:

Alex is a lot like a normal person. But, em, I dinnae [don't] think, like if there was another person... for example, if Alex Rider was real and he met Cat then I dinnae think like the two would get along so very well because Alex is like a wee bit

selfish. And he wants, he wants certain stuff to be done and if people cannae dae [cannot do] it properly or like the best of their abilities, or as good as Alex, then he'll like... like go in a mood or something and just go 'get out the road, I'll dae [do] it myself'.

(Scott aged 13 years)

The character, Alex, is a lesser (fictional) being than his friend, Cat, because of his specialness twinned with his ordinary everyday traits. On the other hand, Cat suggests that the character Darren Shan (Shan, 2000) reminded him of his friends because he liked football with friends and was good at school work:

I think Darren Shan reminded me of some of my pals because before he git into [vampires] he liked playing football with his pals and he was good at school and the behaviour and that's like me. All my pals are quite... are quite brainy an that.

(Cat aged 13 years)

The fictional Darren Shan has characteristics which Cat sees as positive and reflects those of his peer group. The character affirms Cat's own narrative about himself. Cavarero suggests that the literary form becomes the model for 'every *writing* of a life-story' (2000:42). So Darren Shan, the fictional hero, meets Cavarero's (2000) 'protagonist', Cat, the narrator of his own life-story. Young people also identified characters with more traditional heroic qualities such as bravery, courage and skills in 'adventuring'. These were often associated with male characters such as Alex Rider or Harry Potter rather than characters that were female. So Darren Shan is 'funny and fit and that. And he's no like scared or that' (Cat aged 13 years). These skills are more aspirational; ones that are regarded as 'good' but often difficult to demonstrate in everyday life.

Bruner (2002) suggests that stories require characters with an independence of spirit. Most obviously, child characters, especially leading characters, are frequently empowered in ways which are contrary to the societal expectations of children outside the fictional world. Cunningham states that children who read books are able to enter worlds 'governed by very different forces than those of the market or the media' with 'values of the adult world overturned' (2006: 232). This imaginative

world, Cunningham goes on to say, provides an opportunity for children to explore the process of growing up through their immersion in books. These representations can contribute to their sense of self.

Books have traditionally portrayed children with a level of independence that is rare in children's everyday lives such as the child led adventures of Harry Potter or Alex Rider's entry into the adult world of MI6. In children's literature we can see a trend towards greater empowerment of children's characters; they can be serious, engaged and competent. Nikolajeva highlights the paradox stating that:

Children are allowed, in fiction written for their
enlightenment and enjoyment by adults to become strong,
brave, powerful, independent – on certain conditions and for
a certain time.

(Nikolajeva, 2003:129)

By emphasising the boundaries and the temporal nature of children's power, Nikolajeva (2003) suggests that the established order of adult power and child powerlessness can be reversed in books for children. Books for children and young people which portray these empowered child characters might be viewed as going against a dominant trend of adult protectionism towards childhood.

Nikolajeva (2003) goes on to argue that carnival theory is useful to explore the way in which constructions of children as powerless are subverted in books. She quotes Bakhtin whose concept of carnival is that there is a 'temporary reversal of the established order when all societal power structures changes places' (Nikolajeva, 2003:129). Children go from being dependent, lowly in status, following adult instruction to being empowered, rich and powerful under certain conditions and for a limited time (Nikolajeva, 2003). The influence of parents is diminished, allowing 'the child protagonist to have the freedom to explore the world and test the boundaries of independence' (Nikolajeva, 2003: 125). Children are placed in particular situations or settings which empower the child and young person. Hunt (2001), however, questions whether the way in which children are constructed in books is truly subversive and how far this claim can be made for children's books when they are written by adult authors.

The type of story impacts on the way characters are depicted. The independent, problem solving, adventuring fictional young person is endowed with particular attributes. The choice of narrative genres allows authors to create child characters with particular skills and competences. As was seen in the study's survey findings in Chapter 4, young people liked many different kinds of text. At least half of the young people in the survey across the age and gender groups liked 'stories'. Certain styles and genres of fictional text were more popular than others with additional differences due to gender and age. 'Fun stuff' was popular with all age groups and across gender groups as was 'mystery and adventure'. Stories about 'real life' were most popular with girls and older girls in particular. Boys were attracted to more stereotypical male interests such as 'action stories', 'war' and survival'. Younger girls liked more female orientated 'romance and love stories' and also 'characters and schools stories'. Across all categories, a smaller number of young people made choices which were not gendered and many young people identified several different kinds of story that they enjoyed.

It is important to take these choices into account when considering young people's perspectives on characters. Characters may have roles and tasks in an 'action' or 'war' story which are likely to be different to those of 'school' or 'real life' stories. However, these categories are to a certain extent arbitrary and do not necessarily reflect a fixed narrative format with particular character attributes. Having said this, young people appeared to have no difficulty in identifying the kind of stories that they liked and were able to identify particular narrative elements which were relevant to a particular genre.

Drawing on the work of literary critic Northrop Frye and writing about Harry Potter, Nikolajeva (2003) explores the different types of heroes and how they relate to characterisation and narrative in children's literature. Frye, she states, identifies five stages as to how leading characters could be defined in literature. The first character type is the *mythical superhero*, a god and superior to humans. Nikolajeva believes that few characters fit into this category in children's literature. The second is the *romantic hero*, an idealised human being who is superior to others. The third style of narrative is *high mimetic* which portrays heroes as superior humans but not above

'the laws of nature'. Fourthly, are *low mimetic humans* where characters are neither superior nor inferior to other humans. These characters have to fulfil standard roles of young people such as attend school and participate in everyday life. The final category is the *ironic style* where characters are inferior to others in the text (Nikolajeva, 2003). According to this set of definitions, Nikolajeva suggests that it might be assumed that:

All child characters in children's fiction would fit into the ironic stage since they naturally lack experience and knowledge and are therefore inferior to adults.

(Nikolajeva, 2003:126)

Nikolajeva goes on to say that it is not the case that all child characters are depicted as inferior and lacking experience. They can be portrayed as superior human beings who also have ordinary characteristics or as characters who are neither superior nor inferior to other humans. Young people in the study identified characters with attributes resembling those they perceived as being similar to those of 'ordinary children'. So Harry Potter is both ordinary and extraordinary, Darren Shan is 'not like a boy in everyday life' and Tracy Beaker is like a 'real life person'. Taking Frye's definitions, Harry Potter could be identified as a romantic hero or high mimetic character while the more 'realistic characterisation of Tracy Beaker could fit the low mimetic category. Stuart, when asked how young people are depicted in books, stated:

There's a mixture. There's ones that are like super heroes like Harry Potter, Alex Rider and other books depict young people as being like getting bullied.

(Stuart aged 13 years)

On the other hand, these definitions do not appear to give sufficient flexibility to the range of characterisations in books for children. In this regard, Avery (1983), as quoted earlier in this chapter, takes a slightly different perspective, influenced by children's books rather than Frye's theoretical position. The characteristics of heroes within children's books, she states, have been strongly influenced by qualities of which adults and society in general approves at any given time (Avery, 1983). So rather than upsetting an accepted hierarchy as in Nikolajeva's argument, Avery sees

a deliberate alignment with societal attitudes. This is a useful point as there is not one but many understandings of childhood and all may not be represented in individual books. Identifying a dominant perspective which ties in with Avery's general point is therefore more difficult. It may be more applicable to say that the characteristics of heroes are influenced by those which adults (authors, producers, educationalists and parents) may approve of and which young people may or may not find acceptable and resonant with their experience. How and if they coincide is perhaps a mark of a writer who is able to cross and re-cross boundaries of what is acceptable. Kevin, who was reading mostly books for adults, was quite clear that the process of deciding what was and was not included in a book could lead to a shortfall in the satisfaction that a reader derived from the text and ultimately censorship:

Like I mean, Anthony Horowitz books are good but the way he speaks. He's [Alex Rider] 16 or something and it's like, surely you would call a bad guy like a f---ing git but instead he goes 'you fiend or dastard...or you devilish scum'.

(Kevin aged 13 years)

In Kevin's view, there was a collision between the experiences of young people and what is depicted in books or films. He goes on to talk about the reluctance of adults to portray the reality of teenage life with its undercurrent of verbal and physical violence. On the other hand, he also discussed how books can sometimes take a 'real life' situation, which is applicable to the experiences of young people, like running away and make it into more of an event than it would be normally. However, as a keen reader who read books for adults as well as for young people, he was aware that authors use narrative devices to create a sense of story and adventure:

the thing is, in a book, you've got to make it interesting and real life isn't exactly all adventure and running away from home. Or growing up and realising that dragons and aliens exist and going to fight them all with a giant sword called some weird name that's from an ancient god that nobody's ever heard of.

(Kevin aged 13 years)

Kevin accepted the contradictory nature of the fictional book, the balancing of story alongside credible representations of human experience. Characters are developed by

authors to fit the style and orientation of a book, with certain competences and characteristics attributed to particular styles. These characters generally have some naturalistic or 'real life' elements to encourage empathy and association with the characters. The use of different genres and narrative style does not mean that there is no connection with realism. The weaving of realism across all types of text was described by several young people (see Chapter 5). Young people were alert as to whether characters had this element of realism although opinions were varied on whether characters could be seen as reflecting real life or not. One girl, Jane, said:

for some reason it seems like [in] fantasy books that characters are often more like people and then books that [are] specially like real life are not.

(Jane aged 12 years)

This view was confirmed by other young people who liked the combination of adventure, fantasy and a realistic element to the books:

I like because them, eh...at the end of each chapter, they keep ye hanging and ye want tae [to] read a long time, so its like a real life situation they put ye in but the Anthony Horowitz it's like... it's kinda like fantasy.

(Jessica aged 13 years)

This, going back to Nikolajeva's (2003) exploration of Frye's different categories of characters, begins to suggest that the tight boundaries of the high level heroic characters are not necessarily recognised by young people in their reading of the texts. As readers, young people recognised and accepted the differences and similarities, such as the normality of characters like Alex Rider and Harry Potter alongside their fantastical special powers. 'Super hero' status for a young character did not take away from his or her relationship with being young and aspiring to the ordinary. Characters taking on adventures, missions or new roles had a fictional longing for the experience of being a young person. This duality was recognised by young people. Talking about Alex Rider, one boy said:

But then when he's halfway through a mission, he thinks to himself 'Em... my uncle and everything do it for the country and so did James Bond and all the rest of it but I'm really

getting used, I dinnae [don't] want tae dae [to do] this, I want
tae just go tae school and be a normal person and that'.

(Scott aged 13 years)

This balance between the real, normal and everyday, and the extraordinary, adventurous and empowered young character, is a strong theme that emerges from the interviews with young people. It appears, from the responses, that these different competences and attributes were liked by readers. As well as being a narrative device used by authors to build connection and empathy with their reading audiences and the characters they describe, it provides an imaginative space which is grounded in a fictional interpretation of what it means to be young.

Characters, according to the young people in the study, could have a number of different attributes. Firstly, they could have heroic powers and virtues beyond those of ordinary human beings. These allow young characters to take on a unique position in the story. So Harry Potter's particular powers make him special, and in the context of his world, precious and important. Here a young fictional person, as Nikolajeva (2003) describes, is empowered and powerful, although feeling discomforted with this unusual degree of power may be a by-product of this role. Secondly, characters may also have particular skills which are seen to be unusual for a young person to possess but may be within the scope of human possibility. In the case of the character Alex Rider, these include a multitude of skills above and beyond those that young people are expected to have. So he is, according to the young people in this study, very 'fit and adventurous' and speaks a '100 different languages' and is able to do things that young people do not usually do. Thirdly, a character may be firmly tied to 'real life' as described by many young people. This character has attributes which are easily recognised by young people. Sometimes she or he already possesses positive and affirmative qualities of friendship, being fun, going out and doing things. These child characters generally demonstrate personal attributes which make them empathetic to the reader. On the other hand, this character may have to journey, physically or emotionally in the narrative to achieve fictional completion at the end of the story. This journeying may be in advance of the personal experience of the young person reading the text but transition as part of the life course is common to both the reader and the fictional young person.

Young people's responses indicate that young characters presented different depictions of the fictional self. These varied from the extreme positioning of the heroic character, to the skills and talents of the unique individual through to the positive and pleasing attributes of the 'just like us' representation of young people. Characters across all these categories reflected experiences which participants identified as common to their everyday lives such as friendship, activities and problems associated with growing up. They also provided a hopeful and aspirational presentation of the possibilities of being young. Many young people in the study therefore stated that there were characters that were acceptable as fictional depictions of childhood.

The positive presentation of childhood and early adulthood in books is not necessarily in accord with public views about children and childhood which are held by adults. As rehearsed earlier in this thesis, children and young people's lives are intensely scrutinised. Young people come to the attention of the authorities because of the concerns about the wrong they do rather than because of the contribution they can make to society (Rose, 1989). Their visibility is often based on a negative interaction. Adults hold the power to structure the institutions that children use. Children, on the other hand, are the recipients and consumers of these services; the extent of their social agency is often uncertain. Children are 'neither expected nor allowed to fully participate in various domains of social life' (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994: 251). They are expected to occupy their 'designated spaces' rather than encroach on those of adults (James et al, 1998:37). So assertive representations of childhood are not common in society, especially when the audience for these perspectives is primarily composed of adults.

I began this chapter with a question about whether children's books provided alternative representations of childhood that are not dominant. It appears that the centrality of competent child characters provides a counterpoint, to some extent, to dominant understandings of childhood. They can offer different interpretations of the experience of children and young people. Young people's responses noted this profiling of the positive attributes of child characters although some also disputed the success of representation across all texts.

Of course, without an acceptance of children and young people as human beings in their own right, books for this age group would not have a fictional focus or an audience. The responses of participants showed that young people were unlikely to accept stories as credible which did not, in some way, marry with their interest or which diminished their life experience. Presenting child characters with agency is then an important element in books for children and young people, drawing in young readers and gaining their support for the fictional world they are entering. Books, or rather those adults behind the books, encourage a positive relationship with young readers by depicting leading characters in ways that are attractive and enticing rather than negative and unappealing.

But in spite of these portrayals, books remain adult productions which construct the meanings of childhood in partnership with young people as readers. Many young people acknowledged the presence of the adult voice and were comfortable about its presence. However, books are therefore not benignly 'other'; they too replicate and affirm commonly held constructions of childhood and some young people pointed out flaws in the descriptions they encountered. Fictional books are therefore only partial alternatives to a view of childhood as a place of becoming. As I suggested earlier in the chapter, alternative childhoods are not necessarily found in children's books just because they are viewed as being *for* children and young people.

The next chapter explores these themes further, considering whether young people are the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them, focusing on both gender and generation as examples of the factors which shape our identities.

¹³ *Doubleday* (Wilson, 2001)

¹⁴ *Blood Pressure* (Gibbons, 2005)

¹⁵ *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* (Adams, 2001)

¹⁶ *His Dark Materials* (Pullman, 2001)

¹⁷ *Stormbreaker* (Horowitz, 2004)

Chapter 7 Fictional presences across gender and generation

I recognise now, I think how very little distinction we make
(are able to make) between real children and our fantasy
children; that as we talk to, watch, teach and write about
children, we want something from them, desire them, want
the thing we can't have which is the past: our own lost
childhood.

(Steedman, 1990: 258)

In order to consider whether young people are the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them, this chapter considers in what ways young people's relationships to books are gendered and what young people say about the presence and role of adults in books. The chapter will look at how these different influences impact on young people's understandings of how childhood is represented in books.

These two areas have a particular resonance in children's books for a number of reasons. Firstly, as has been considered in Chapter 4, young people's reading identities are, to some extent, gendered. Their relationships to books, how and what they read, are influenced by whether they are boys or girls. Whether this extends to other aspects of the text is considered in this chapter. Secondly, adults have a multitude of roles in relation to books, reflecting a generational presence which can be overt as well as more circumspect. Within texts, adult characters can have different roles but are rarely centre stage since they are displaced by fictional young people. I explore the views of young people on the presence of adults as authors and as characters in order to find out how adult-child relations are represented in books.

Gendered textual identities

As we saw in Chapter 4, young people's reading identities were often gendered with different influences and interests impacting on their reading. The study found that girls liked reading more than boys and did more of it. Older boys read less frequently than any other group and a persistent tenth of boys in both age groups

found reading difficult. These findings show that boys' and girls' engagement with books can be quite different with boys less likely to be interested in the act of reading than girls. This then impacts on young people's wider engagement with books. However, there is a proviso. Many girls and boys had common reading interests and habits and this similarly gendered pattern should not be ignored. Understandings of gendered childhoods need to reflect this diversity and not be simplistically attributed to binary opposites. This is discussed later in this chapter.

In this study, boys, particularly those attending secondary school, appeared to be less engaged with school and with its relationship to reading than girls. Less than a quarter of boys, for example, were interested in books which helped them with school work. Fewer older boys than girls read regularly when they were not in school and nearly a third of the older boys read because it was a compulsory rather than a chosen activity (see also Chapter 4). This resonates with other writing about young people's disaffection with education and their gendered experiences in school. The increasing scholarisation of childhood, where young people spend more time in schools and other institutional settings means that young people's lives, constructs of childhood and the adult regulated environment of schools are closely interrelated (Qvortrup, 1994; Mayall, 2002). Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers (1992) point out that the majority of children spend time equally between the 'work-world' (schooling), the 'home-world' and the 'sleep-world'. If young people, and in particular boys, are finding it difficult to negotiate school, they may find it difficult to negotiate a substantial part of their childhood experience. Childhood and the experiences of some young people can then be defined negatively by adults because some young people are failing to meet societal expectations of how they should behave and perform in this scholarly environment. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) draw attention to the impact of gender in the school environment. Teachers have been concerned about gendered choices of subjects and academic interests as well as educational achievement. Boys have traditionally been encouraged to take up science and girls to sign up for arts subjects (Millard, 1997). With responsibility for reading sited in the arts, concern about boys' literacy has become more acute. Millard (1997) reflects that girls and boys have a gendered experience of school and

therefore reading. She argues that the classroom environment prioritises girls' interests more than boys with the emphasis in schools often on reading stories as a way of giving an insight into individual experience. This is seen to be a female rather than male interest. Lesnik-Oberstein (1998) suggests that teaching has been informed by liberal humanism which sees the ideal as children who 'like' or 'love' their books and who will then learn voluntarily. Coles and Hall add to this perception of fictional dominance in teaching practices by stating that literacy is taught at school through the medium of stories, so 'being good at reading' becomes synonymous with being good at reading stories' (2002:105). The focus of my study on fictional representations appears to endorse this position, potentially disadvantaging boys because of the concentrations on stories and the traditional novel format.

On the other hand, the research showed that stories were popular with boys and girls, indicating that fiction was of interest to both genders. This interest in stories far exceeded that of factual books as shown by the questionnaire responses discussed in Chapter 4. But some fictional texts are less likely to have a place in classroom teaching (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Comics and game books, both highly popular with boys in the study, might not be seen to be high value educationally although they are fiction. Some kinds of stories can be viewed as better than others by adults because they are acceptable as part of school based activity. However, by contrast, some participants' (particularly boys) had an antipathy to school influences on their reading (see questionnaire findings in Chapter 4). This might have been fostered by poor adult responses to their reading interests.

Millard (1997) also points out that teachers' focus on texts in the classroom is on the motivation and plausibility of actions in books. This, she suggests, is more appealing to girls while boys, on the other hand, prefer a greater emphasis on plot and action. Classroom texts can also prioritise 'real world' texts rather than fantasy or action orientated stories (Millard, 1997). Boys can then be disenchanted by this choice of genre. This is reflected in some boys' comments and is explored later in this chapter. In the last decade there has been a significant increase in texts which are fantasy and with a strong focus on action. These kinds of texts may be increasingly used in classroom literacy practices although this area was not explored in this study. In

passing, however, young people mentioned that ‘real life’ books were generally used in the classroom including the work of Jacqueline Wilson and books such as *Holes* by Louis Sachar (2000). Books by Anthony Horowitz, more likely to be categorised as adventure, were also mentioned.

The survey found that many boys liked books which were about ‘action’, ‘war’ and ‘suspense and horror’ in higher numbers than girls. Larger numbers of girls, on the other hand, liked ‘things to do with real life’ and ‘romance and love stories. This gendered split in reading interests is also backed up by the research of Coles and Hall (2002) where they found that the most significant area of difference was books about relationships and romance. More boys were reading books that could be categorised as science fiction and fantasy, sports, war and spy stories (Coles and Hall, 2002). In this study, there were also choices which were common to both genders. Boys and girls choose ‘fun’ and ‘mystery and adventure’ to describe what they like reading about. Young people also picked categories which were dominant choices by the other gender such as the small number of girls who chose ‘war’ and the significant number of boys who chose ‘things to do with real life’. This again suggests that assumptions about gender need to accommodate difference and nuance as well as emphasise gendered differentiation.

The acting of reading was also an activity more engaged in by girls rather than boys. The survey question on what young people did out of school found that boys were much more likely to take part in physical activity such as playing sports while girls were more likely to read, listen to music and being in touch with friends. This is in accord with other research. Reading is often regarded as a feminised activity (Millard, 1997). Drawing on the work of Goffman on the manifestation of gender behaviours across settings, Millard suggests that:

Reading and the associated behaviour of sitting quietly or becoming absorbed in a book can also be understood as gender marked behaviour.

(Millard, 1997: 20)

This also links to adults’ views of children and young people’s behaviour in school. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood (2007) state that teachers see girls’ quiet and more

passive behaviour as an indication of their maturity. This then places boys' behaviour in opposition to girls and as active and noisy. Girls are more suited, according to these assumptions, to reading. Coles and Hall (2002) contribute further to the notion of reading as a female pursuit. In interviews, girls stated that they were better suited to reading than boys. They thought that boys were more focused on physical activity (Coles and Hall, 2002).

I am cautious about attributing particular gendered positions to boys and girls on the basis of the findings from my survey questions. The findings provide an indication of gendered behaviour but merit exploration through further research on young people's engagement with texts and their involvement in other activities. But interpreting boys' behaviour as physical and girls as interested in relationships and books indicates that there are gendered attitudes to the act of reading at least to some extent. Nodelman (2002), in his study of boys in fiction, says that being interested in books in North America is seen as 'girly'. Clark et al (2008), in a survey of 1600 students, found that girls who read believed that readers were those who were clever, did well and were happy. On the other hand, boys who read thought that readers were 'geeky' and 'nerds'. More boys than girls who did not read thought that reading was a 'girls' thing'. Being seen as a reader was not therefore necessarily desirable for boys (Clark et al, 2008). This was not raised in the study as a pertinent point by either boys or girls in relation to the act of reading but other responses revealed a gendered positioning on books.

A significant proportion of young people indicated in the survey that they would not read books if they were viewed as being for the other gender. But what influenced their reading choices, as explored in Chapter 4, was not just the text itself. It also included the cover of a book, its design and illustration, the blurb on the back of the book and what the young person already knew about the text. As one boy, Jack, said about a gendered targeting of books:

I can read ones that are written for boys or are written for anybody. But the girls' ones, I can just recognise the cover immediately. It's just something about the cover that's just weird. It's all terrible, about two girls in high school arguing.

I like things that have a bit of personal stuff but mostly actions. Funny bits.

(Jack aged 11 years)

Jack was emphatic about his distaste for girls' books which were about both school and problems with relationships even though he was an enthusiastic reader who expressed a great passion for books during the interview. He liked 'a bit of personal stuff' but 'action' was the favoured component in the books he enjoyed.

As books are written by adults, gendered readings reflect adults' perspectives as well those of their readers. This is not restricted to the author-reader relationship. Other influences on the reading identities of young people reflect gender positions which are not the sole responsibility of the author but are also contributed to by the other adults-in-the-text such as publishers, illustrators, critics and teachers. As Morrow (2006) suggests, children construct their gender identities drawing on a variety of influences. Pennell (2002) suggests that children's literature can have a role in 'sustaining or challenging the existing binary gender hierarchy' (2002:55).

Young people's preferences for particular books reveal that texts can be associated with broad gendered choices. The way that books are presented to young people can include gendered prompts to readers even before they read the first page. A significant proportion of young people in the study stated that a book was not for them if they thought it was targeted at the other gender. Segel (1986) points out that there has been a gendering of children's books, both in their content and production, which goes back to the nineteenth century. Adults want young people, and especially boys, to read (Wannamaker, 2008). Overtly targeting books at particular groups of readers is then seen as a way of helping to ensure that this aspiration is met. In 2007, one major UK bookstore had in-store displays which identified 'books for girls' and 'books for boys', reflecting, perhaps, a marketing exercise which built on common concerns about children and young people's reading. An article in *The Wall Street Journal* (Hechinger, 2008) describes how US publishers released over 200 books aimed at boys in 2007 using 'blood and guts' and 'toilet' humour to encourage boys' interest thereby moving away from traditional texts to get boys reading. Adults appear, in these instances, to weigh up the value given to certain

texts against the educational imperative of encouraging greater literacy. However, there are also hazards in these strategies just as there are in promoting texts which either boys or girls do not like. Gendered constructions can become embedded in young people's reading and social identities without allowing young people to make choices about texts.

Gendered representation

In order to explore the degree of identification that young people had with gendered presentations within books, young people were asked about their preferences for boy or girl characters. On the whole, young people tended to prefer characters of the same gender as themselves although some girls did mention male characters such as Alex Rider, Darren Shan and Harry Potter (see also Chapter 6). Leading characters were often identified as the 'heroes' of books although they might not have the complete portfolio of heroic skills and competences (see also Chapter 6). Hourihan (1997) emphasises that the heroes of adventure books have been traditionally male and that female readers have accommodated themselves to that dominance. Talking of her childhood reading she says that:

Hero stories are not my story, but when I was young I learnt, like all female readers of Western literature to read as a male, to share the perspective of the protagonist, and in doing so I internalised the view that the male was the norm and the female something else.

(Hourihan, 1997: 6)

Le Guin (1993), who wrote the *Earthsea* trilogy (1979), a fantasy series for children, says that the hero is always a man in hero tales. Stephens and McCallum (1998), in their study of fictional retellings, confirm this perspective saying that heroic stories tend to be patriarchal with male characters being active and female ones passive. Talking about wider understandings of the term, Hall suggests that the concept of heroism operates on a 'decisively masculine terrain' even though heroines do exist (1996:116).

The view that heroes should be boys or men was reflected in a number of the boys' responses. Boys who discussed the gender of characters were outspoken about their

discomfort at having significant characters that were female. They stated that they did not like girl characters, especially when they were the leading characters in the books they read. They were more comfortable with boy characters who had particular attributes and competences that they felt were recognisable as male, again in line with Hourihan's (1997) idea that the hero story is 'his story'. The boys who discussed characterisation in this way had a perception that girl characters could not undertake certain tasks. Girl characters, according to these boys, did not have the capacities and skills to undertake particular acts or feats. Girls were not therefore regarded as competent as boys.

One interview with two boys aged 13 and 14 years old, revealed that some boys were particularly precise about the limitations of girls within books and their own preference for boy characters. Their perspective was that boy characters were more adventurous than girls and therefore in line with their own interests. Boys, here not specifically defined by the boys as characters in books, took on more significant tasks. Girls were not perceived to have the same adventuring spirit and were not 'finishers'. Boys, in these leadership roles, they stated, were more believable than girls:

Jonathan: I think it's better if it's a boy kinda.

Paul: Cos the girls wouldn't dae [do] as much stuff as what boys dae.

Jonathan: I think like girls arenae like truly interested in like getting adventures...But laddies [boys] are like mair [more] possessive sorta because they want to get to the end of something. They will nae [not] leave a job undone.

Interviewer: So you think it's different if a character is a girl or a boy?

Jonathan: Aye. I think there's a big difference.

(Jonathan aged 14 years and Paul aged 13 years)

The boys were aware that what they were saying was not really acceptable in their dismissal of girls:

I mean, I'm no being sexist or that but like... ye'd believe it mair [more] if it's a laddie that's daeing [doing] it, no a lassie.

(Paul aged 13 years)

When asked if there were girl characters that they liked, the boys continued to debate the merits of characters. Hermione, the leading girl character in the Harry Potter series, was regarded as being 'quite good' as a character by Jonathan. Paul disputed this, saying that he did not think Hermione was that important. But she was the 'brainiest' Jonathan rebutted. This attribute of intelligence did not compensate for the character, Hermione, being a girl:

She's like the brainiest, she kens [knows] all the spells but really I think if she wasnae there, Harry and Ron would still work their way roond [round] it. I think Ron's quite...mair [more] important than Hermione.

(Paul aged 13 years)

Jonathan was persistent in giving credit to Hermione's skills; she was able to do things. She had the skills of 'wizardry and something else at the exact same time but she can dae [do] them both' (Jonathan aged 14 years).

The discussion continued focusing on a book, *Underworld* by Catherine MacPhail (2004) about a school trip that goes wrong with five young people finding themselves trapped underground. Paul who doubted the prowess of girls as characters, talked about a leading girl character. The start of the book was 'brilliant' but as the story moves on 'it just went fae [from] brilliant tae [to] being one of the worst books I've ever read' (Paul aged 13 years); the intimation being that no books which had a girl as a leading character could sustain itself as a gripping read.

These rebuttals of girls' abilities were repeated by a number of the boys' who commented on girl characters in books. For boys who agreed with this perspective, a book was less credible if a leading character was a girl. It was 'better it's a boy' rather than a girl. A story was less believable if it was a girl. Another male reader, Cat, suggested that he was distracted by central girl characters, 'I cannae [cannot] concentrate if it's a girl'. He goes on to comment about his perception of the difference between boys and girls:

I dinnae ken [don't know] why but it's just...I think like, like girls feel different from laddies and that.

He cannot read books meant for girls:

because most girls like make up and stuff like that and
laddies are intae [into] football and gory stuff and that.
(Cat aged 13 years)

Cat's intimation was that girls liked less interesting and demanding activities than boys; the make up and 'stuff like that'. Boys were active, sporty and interested in the bloodthirsty. Girls were therefore perceived as unadventurous, passive and interested in their own appearance rather than being outwardly focused and energetic like boys. Cat is suggesting that boys and girls' gendered positions are at opposite ends of the stereotypical spectrum. His views are in line with some of the other young male readers who did not like girls to be leading characters and in positions of power. They thought that boy characters were best placed to take on the mantle of leadership within narratives.

This poor view of textual girls also extended, on occasion, to female authors and their perceived misjudgement about boys' interests. Boys indicated that these writers did not respond to their gendered interests and were writers for girls rather than boys. A number of boys commented on the lack of relevance of Jacqueline Wilson's books to themselves. Books by this author were read regularly in most participants' schools, especially in primary schools, so most boys had had contact with her novels. Two boys, Adam and Charlie, also spoke about Jacqueline Wilson and what Charlie called her 'girly books' with particular passion:

Charlie: ...and the teacher's read a few of them to us. *The Suitcase Kid* and it was a good book like but it was...it's no [not] one I would have picked up and read myself. And she read another one. She started reading another one. It was called *The Lottie Project*.

Adam: I hated that

Charlie: That was the worst book ever.

Adam: It was like...well, I love Jacqueline Wilson books because I've read loads of them but there's something that really annoys me sometimes, which is she puts...it's always girls is the character in her books and I'd like to see a boy being put into a book like as a main character because in *The Lottie Project*, there was a boy that was mentioned but he wasn't a main character.

(Adam and Charlie aged 11 years)

The boys talked further about Jacqueline Wilson's books, acknowledging that *The Suitcase Kid* (Wilson, 1992) was a good book 'for it being about a girl' (Adam).

Adam concludes this part of the discussion suggesting that:

I would read more Jacqueline Wilson books if she put more boys in them because she is a good writer but it's sometimes...it isn't mysterious enough, if you know what I mean.

(Adam aged 11 years)

In spite of their expressed dislike of some of the books or the dominance of female characters, the boys' responses also revealed some ambiguity, suggesting that some of the books and indeed the work of the author did appeal. However, as Adam suggests, the books did not offer him the 'mystery' he wanted and he was disappointed that boys were not in significant roles.

These perspectives are not unusual. In their research with boys of a similar age group to this study, Frosh et al (2002) found that boys described themselves as physically active while they perceived girls as 'just' sitting around. Hall and Coles (1999) in their research on children's reading choices found that boys emphasised independence and autonomy in their response to texts while girls talked about families and community. Walkerdine (1985) says that theories of child development construct childhood as 'active' and 'discovering' but that in actual fact boys are often described as active with girls being seen as passive. Within that perspective 'masculinity and childhood work to prohibit passivity' but girls' position as children stays 'shaky and partial', influenced by being feminine (Walkerdine, 1985: 210). Boys are not expected to be passive but the converse is true for girls. It appears that boys in the study were not unaware of this difference, hence Jonathan's comments about sexism discussed earlier in this section and the intimation that authors such as Jacqueline Wilson would be more acceptable to readers if they refocused their interest on boys. The boys, particularly the older boys who were interviewed, appeared to be aware of the different constructs of girls and boys in and out of the text.

It is not accurate to say that boys' attitudes to girls in the text were uniformly disparaging or negative. The earlier exchange between the two boys also suggested that the negative views of Jonathan about girl characters were not held by Paul who credited Hermione in the Harry Potter books with skills and expertise. Other boys also did not suggest that they disliked female characters, authors and certain kind of texts. Some boys stated that they were not put off by overt gendering of the books they read. Two boys agreed that that they did not mind about whether the author Catherine MacPhail's books had male or female characters 'as long as it's a good book' (Iain aged 13 years). This is in accord with research undertaken by James (2005) with young people, where 10 year old young people were asked about age related activities. In James's research, some girls thought that girls were more sensible while boys considered that they were stronger and could get themselves out of trouble more easily. Many young people indicated that boys and girls should be treated the same (James, 2005).

Findings from this study show that while there appears to be a gender focus which underpins young people's engagement with texts, it is not consistently given a high profile by all young people. Their explicit gendered identity ebbs and flows. Thorne (1993) suggests that while a boy will always be a boy, in some situations that part of his identity will be more relevant than others. It is not always the case that young people will take up conventional gender positions in spite of the strong societal orientation towards gendered constructions of self (Marsh and Millard, 2000). Younger et al (2005) warn of generalising about the behaviour of boys and girls, stating that influences on young people extend far beyond a simple analysis based on gender..

On the other hand, gendered representations in books for young people are not always necessarily overt but they often underpin archetypes, rather than stereotypes, of characters. As discussed in Chapter 6, children's books often draw on hero tales and myths. If this is the case and heroes are male, young people will be reading gendered representations which endorse particular characteristics. As Hourihan (1997) states, the archetypal hero is young, adolescent and male. She goes on to say that:

Hero stories inscribe the male/female dualism, asserting the male as the norm, as what it means to be human and defining the female as other—deviant, different, dangerous
(Hourihan, 1997:68)

These perspectives of the young male character as hero, leader and adventurer were in line with boys' views. Girls, on the other hand, can be constructed in a variety of different ways in books. As Hourihan (1997) points out, the female hero is not the norm in heroic roles with their position much more uncertain. Ursula Le Guin, from an authorial point of view, says that the history of hero-tales shows that:

women are not heroes. They are sidekicks. Never the Lone Ranger, always Tonto. Women are seen in relation to heroes: as mother, wife, seducer, beloved, victim, or rescuable maiden.

(Le Guin, 1993: 5)

In comparison, the hero-tale has 'concerned the establishment of validation of manhood' with journeys, contests and tests at their heart (Le Guin, 1993: 5). Portraying male heroes as doers with high level skills and competences is reflected in many stories for young people such as Alex Rider in the series by Anthony Horowitz. This representation also mirrors a perception expressed by some of the boys that girls were regarded as more passive and less active than themselves and male characters. In contrast to Hourihan's deviant female persona described above, all children, but particularly girls, can also be portrayed as helpless and innocent in books (Rudd, 2000). Brownstein (1984), talking about adult fiction and women readers' relationships to novels, suggests that the female heroine has different qualities to that of the male leading character. The search of the female reader for the heroine in books is about being 'significant'. 'Novel heroines' she goes on to say 'like novel readers, are often women who want to become heroines' (Brownstein, 1984: xv). They are aspirational. The successful outcome of a narrative is often depicted as engagement in romantic relationships. This female activity of looking to the future is reinforced by research on childhood. James (2005) in her study on young people and their attitudes to the life course, suggests that girls were more future orientated than boys. Steedman (1982) in *The Tidy House* found that eight

year old girls wrote a story about the home that they would live in one day rather than a fairy story.

It is difficult, however, to match constructs of girls as deviant, innocent, passive, aspirational, in or out of books, with the perspectives of girls in this study. These participants did not perceive themselves in these terms. Their responses to questions about gender in texts were more ambivalent than those of boys. In interviews, they reinforced their interests in texts across different types and genres. One girl refuted the notion that books about traditional male interests such as football, were not meant for girls:

You can read all sorts. Like even stuff like, maybe, normally the football ones they normally say 'Oh it's a guy type of thing' but it's not really. Loads of girls can read [them].
(Ruby aged 13 years)

Her friend agreed with this viewpoint. They did not believe that they should be excluded from texts which might be seen as for boys.

Although these girls declared their interests in books that could be seen as for boys, other girls also declared their interest in what one called 'girly stuff' which included texts about romance:

In *Girls in Love*, it's just about teenage girls in love and the romance and stuff.
(Kylie aged 11 years)

Others also relished books about these areas of traditional feminine interest. In comparison with the boy reader who stated that the work of Jacqueline Wilson was not for boys, a girl talked of how this author's books, their subject matter and the way they were presented attracted her:

Yeah. Well, Jacqueline Wilson's really good at that sort of thing [writing about real life problems] cos she like does divorce and foster families and like death and that...like stuff like that. But she doesn't write it like in a depressing way. She writes it in a sort of funny way so it's really good. That's the kinda thing I like cos I'm a girl.
(Stephanie aged 13 years)

Stephanie asserted that she was interested in the text because she was a girl. Her comments indicate that she viewed this portrayal of female identity as positive. The seriousness of the topics and humour was a pleasing and satisfying representation. She liked the way that the authors such as Jacqueline Wilson and Sophie Kinsella (2006) wrote about complex areas of young people's lives. Books which had a focus on relationships, fun and a general empathy with girls' interests were popular with many of the girls. There was no indication that they regarded this interest as inferior in comparison with boys' tastes or that girls liked characters who were passive or unadventurous. On the contrary, a number of the girls pointed out that they liked the physical activity of characters in books and they identified with these attributes. One girl, speaking about the Famous Five books by Enid Blyton, identified what she liked about the characters:

It's the adventure. They're not like stuck in the house all the time.

(Louise aged 10 years)

She did not want a domestic positioning of the story. In comparison with some of the male participants' rejection of characters who were female, girls were generally more prepared to accept the presence of both boy and girl characters. One girl enjoyed the wider experience that came from having both genders in books:

I liked mixed cos like ye can get a wee bit more information about boys and girls and stuff like that.

(Holly aged 13 years)

Two other girls did not believe it mattered if there was a boy or girl lead character. The focus was on the quality of the text:

I don't really mind. As long as the book's good I don't mind.

(Stephanie aged 13 years)

I don't think it matters if it's a girl or boy cos it's still an enjoying read.

(Jessica aged 13 years)

Stephanie and Jessica went on to agree that there were not books just for girls or boys. Jane highlighted that she would usually like a girl character. If there was a boy character, she wanted him to have characteristics that were similar to a girl, 'a boy who's more like a girl' (Jane aged 12 years). Jessica pointed out that books tended to have 'girl or boy characters but they don't have both' (Jessica aged 13 years).

Girls appeared to accept a wider range of representations of young people in books. They liked girl characters but were also prepared to accept boys in the text without the negative reaction to the other gender that some boys expressed. Although some boys indicated that they saw girls as less focused on adventure and more interested in supposed home-based feminine interests such as make up and relationships, girls did not appear to fit some boys' perception of them as passively 'girly'. However, many girls did like books which had a strong focus on relationships, often describing lively characters with whom they empathised.

There was a wide continuum of gendered attitudes, perspectives and experiences among the participants. Many boys and girls had different reading habits and interests. Some of these changed as young people got older. Even in areas where young people's reading identities were particularly gender biased such as the kind of books that they liked, there were common areas of interest across nearly all categories. Some young people also read across the gender divide, choosing books about areas which were often seen to be for one particular gender group. There were therefore dominant gender choices made by many young people, some that were not gendered that a significant majority of young people chose and, finally, those whose choices did not neatly fit gender patterns.

Many young people did describe their interests from a gendered perspective with at least some boys seeing themselves and boy characters in books as having particular characteristics which could be regarded as male; being adventurous, active and generally physical in their presentation. Some boys did not see girls as credibly possessing these attributes, indicating that they did not have the capacity or the interest to take on roles which displayed these kinds of behaviours. On the other hand, no girls described strong gendered reactions against either boy characters or

the type of texts in which they were interested. They were generally more accepting of boys-in-the-text. Girls also declared that they liked books which they saw as being for them, enjoying the combination of characterisation, setting and plot of these texts.

These findings suggest that young people's understandings of how childhood is constructed both in and out of books are gendered but the extent of this gendering, returning to Thorne's (1993) position, is not fixed and is, instead, flexible. However, there is also a complex interaction of influences on books which can foster gendered readings by young people. These derive from young people's direct experience but are also an outcome of adults' influence. This takes a number of forms. The very act of reading and approaches to reading in schools are often seen as gendered, likely to appeal more to female than male readers. But texts themselves, their content, appearance and marketing, as presented by adults to children and young people, can emphasise gendered positions.

Gendered relationships are present across young people's engagement with books. Before they read a book, young people make decisions about what books they will read or not read. Once reading, young people respond to the books' content and some of their judgements are gendered. But these views are not arrived at solely on the basis of young people's own experience; readers are also responding to the cues that come from adults' contributions to the text. As Thorne (1993) suggests, power is core to understanding gender relations and boys and girls are subordinate to adults. This next section considers young people's views on two aspects of adult engagement; adults as writers of texts for children and adults as they are represented in the text.

Adults representing young people

The role of adults is never neutral in children's books, whether depicting aspects of childhood such as gender or in representing the counterpoint age position of adulthood. They are proactive producers of the books that young people read. Adults have a major investment in the formation of children's identities. Children and young people are a distinct group in society but their relationship to adults and their

relationships with adults defines both their 'otherness' and their inter-dependency. Prout (2005) suggests that modernity separates childhood from adulthood while Mayall (2002; 2006) confirms that this separation has a long history. Do books emphasise this adult-child separation? Or do books provide a fictional space for children and young people and, at least in some instances, another interpretation of generational exchange? Young people's views on the presence of adults in books offer an opportunity to explore this adult-child dynamic further.

There are, as has been suggested throughout this study, different aspects to adults' interactions with children's books. On one hand, adults have a watchful and facilitative role in relation to young people's engagement with books as educators, carers and producers of texts (Hunt, 1991; Hollindale, 1997). This is often manifested in a focus on the developing child; the child who is socialised and educated through books. A much smaller group of adults have a particularly intimate role as authors (although behind them are many other adult participants who are involved in this creative process as co-producers of texts). In this role, authors create other adults as characters and set them within the dynamic of a story. They may also choose to exclude adults from their texts or give them particular powers. Their depiction of the interaction between young people and adults is therefore highly relevant as to whether books are seen by young people to represent aspects of childhood.

Adult authors write for a non-peer audience (Hunt, 1991). This generational relationship is a central dynamic in books for children and young people. It is also one which raises particular questions about how well adults can depict childhood for a younger audience at a distance dictated by age. Writers bring their adult perspectives to bear in creating what they regard as appropriate in the text. Zipes (2001) points out that authors rarely write specifically for children. When they do:

the writing is likely done on behalf of children, that is, for their welfare, or what the author conceives of as a children's audience or childhood.

(Zipes, 2001:44)

They draw on societal knowledge as well as individual experience, bringing their own intuitions about childhood to the story. Authors can never, however, ‘inhabit the presentness of childhood’ (Hollindale, 1997: 22). They are separated by time, maturity and changes in culture from childhood. This does not mean that adult authors are unable to depict childhood but that their depiction is based on a variety of influences. Watson says that children’s fiction should be thought of as:

the imaginative creation of a cultural space in which writers find ways of exploring what they want to say to – and about children – an area in which adults can engage in various kinds of shared and dynamic discourse.

(Watson, 1992b:11)

This suggests that a generational alliance can be fostered between authors and readers, depending on what adult authors present to young people in fictional texts. Young people can freely choose to enjoy or to dislike the texts they read, even if these are compulsory within an educational setting. On the other hand, adults can also censor what they write, exerting traditional adult control through stories. Querying whether adults can write adequately about and for children has some common cause with those in childhood studies who question the omission of the perspectives of children and young people (James et al, 1998; Qvortrup et al, 1994). This is one of the fundamental questions at the heart of children’s fiction; whether an adult writing for children can adequately represent and understand that audience (Rose, 1993). This quandary was reflected by some participants in the study:

I don’t think that what people write for teenagers is too accurate but then that’s based on what I do. Someone else might think that it is in a different situation.

(Stuart aged 13 years)

Another young person, Nicole, also questioned the ‘accuracy’ of adults representing young people in fiction:

Some of them are but other ones are just sort of really inaccurate.

(Nicole aged 12 years)

Jane thought that many books did not represent young people’s experiences well:

I don't think many books are really like what a young person's like. Well, once I read a book written by a 12 year old and she was a really good writer and I thought that was actually the closest that had been to a young person.
(Jane aged 12 years)

Jane, who talks in her interview about the way in which she perceived adult authors misrepresent young people, confirms that there is a contradiction in adults writing for a non peer audience. She suggests that there is the potential for younger people to create fiction. Traditionally published fiction rarely profiles the work of young authors. Other forms of both new and old forms of storytelling such as the internet and oral storytelling, games and folklore have given young people authorial voices but these are generally unrecognised by adults (Hollindale, 1997; Sutton-Smith, 1995). Adults retain the creative power to generate formal texts for children. Most young people in this study accepted this status quo and did not query the right of adults to write stories about their generation. They did not view this as unusual. Mackey (2007) found that young people were used to the conventions of a 'closed text' which was produced by others.

Writers were judged for their effectiveness in telling stories and also for their empathy with young people. So being a 'good' writer meant by default that the author was in tune with young people. Where they were seen to be patronising or misjudged the agency of young people, they were less popular. These choices were not, of course, consistent as young people had individual reactions to the same writer, hence Stuart's earlier acknowledgement that other young people might think differently to himself. As has been explored earlier in this chapter, a number of male readers were dismissive of the work of Jacqueline Wilson, seeing her works as not being for them but for girls. Many female readers on the other hand praised her ability to write in tune with the interests of her (girl) readers. Young people did not allude to the generational difference between authors and themselves, except in the instances where they highlighted the absence of younger writers of books for young people. One young person, in a discussion about the gap in years between Jacqueline Wilson and herself did not see this as a hindrance. She thought that this author had got a 'good imagination' (Holly aged 13 years).

Writers of books for young people were not invisible to readers. Young people, as highlighted in Chapter 6, were aware of the authorial voices which lay behind the text, acknowledging different writers and their particular styles. As Stephanie said, when asked why she liked books about real life:

They just keep you in suspense and Jacqueline Wilson's really funny and, Sophie Kinzella's books are like real life situations and I just like them. They're like good authors.
(Stephanie aged 12 years)

Ruby described what she thought made the work of the author, Catherine MacPhail so effective for young people:

She kinda knows what teenagers like to read about and there's not any stuff that would kinda put us off reading it. She knows exactly what we want to read and she kinda... she goes with that and puts it into a really good story.
(Ruby aged 13 years)

The profile given to authors through marketing and other media such as authors' websites, television and magazine articles, literary awards and publicity resulting from film or television adaptations also meant that young people knew a variety of biographical and professional details about particular authors. Some of these authors such as J.K Rowling, Jacqueline Wilson, Anthony Horowitz and Philip Pullman had the status of celebrities, resulting, for example, in Jacqueline Wilson's legendary queues at book signing events. A number of schools who took part in this research had had visits from authors and some had visited a major Scottish annual book festival with its substantial programme targeted at schools. These different relationships and pieces of information built up stronger connections between young people and adult authors.

Although adults write for a non peer audience, this did not appear to be a barrier to young people's engagement with books. It was unusual for young people to talk about books they liked without mentioning the authors. Young people did not suggest that there was a generation divide between adult authors and themselves. They did not appear to view these adults as holding power over them which was negative or detrimental. However, some young people did state that some writers did

not represent young people's experiences well. Young people therefore appeared, on the whole, to tolerate and accept the adult producers of texts.

Adults in the text

Adult characters are not at the centre of books for young people. Here, fictional adults are displaced by young people. This is the opposite of every day situations where young people are usually positioned as less powerful than adults, confirming a generational tradition of authority. Books for young people, after all, are not primarily about adults so young characters are granted (by the adult author) more textual space. This is also emphasised by the frequent use of young first person narrators (Stephens, 2005). Adults are not necessarily absent. Their presence manifests itself in number of ways. Firstly, they have a profile as characters in roles which relate to the younger leading characters and to the narrative requirements (as opposed to the everyday where children and young people relate to adults). These are usually secondary characters with graduated spheres of influence depending on the text. Young people noted this placing of adults with one young person stating:

Well it really depends like what's happening. Like if they say 'Alex Rider's talking to this friend like while someone's standing at the corner' then that person, that adult's gonna be really important later on in the story so it just depends what like, what context they're used in.

(Paul aged 13 years)

Adults were also influential in a less obvious way on the margins. As Jessica said:

Well, like some of the adults in like Catherine MacPhail books and that are just like real life adults and parents. [Young people are] grounded, get into trouble and stuff like that and they always get into trouble.

(Jessica aged 13 years)

These displaced adult roles provide a reminder of what many adults think the behaviour, activities and actions of young people should be. Boundaries, often based on what adults expect young people to do (going to school, coming home at night, not speaking to strangers) are then ignored or broken. Adults in this position can become foils for the action of the plot or are an echo of another real life world where

certain kinds of behaviour are not tolerated. These rules are then suspended in the fictional text. So Harry Potter's guardians, his aunt and uncle, the Dursleys, are described in the novels as ridiculous and conformist without love or affection for Harry. This depiction does not change, suggesting Lurie's (1990) view that, while child characters often grow and change during the story, adult characters are often unable to undergo this process of alteration. The Dursleys' miserable 'stuckness' as characters provides a backdrop and a reason for Harry to leave home. He is not loved or wanted by his relatives. He can then develop his own powers in an environment, the boarding school, Hogwarts, which recognises his specialness and becomes more of a home than that with his family.

The absencing of adults from books has long been a narrative device used in texts for children. In a fictional world, young people are empowered to undertake tasks that adults would normally undertake. This they do often aided and abetted by other young people. In this fictional world, adults become less powerful. They fade into the background, disappear or become enemies and oppressors or are equals rather than superior to the younger protagonists. In books, children and young people are not so dependent on adults. Adults are pushed out of their familiar dominance in their role as carers, managers and arbiters. Adults can become arch enemies or, interestingly peers or co-conspirators, turning upside down our societal model of adult-child relations. Lurie (2004), talking of the books that children choose, says that adults who are important are villains and those adults who are well meaning do not really know what is happening. Young people recognised that adults were marginal. As Jonathan aged 14 years says 'I don't think they're that important'. He goes on to say that 'most of the time they are just there'. His interview partner agrees with him saying 'I just ken [know] they're just there' (Paul aged 13 years).

It was suggested in Chapter 5 that fantasy offered a literary and imaginative freedom away from the strictures of adult concerns about childhood and society. Displacing adults is particularly prevalent in fantasy and adventuring stories where the absence of adults or their assumptions of different roles in counterpoint to the main young characters create a different space for children and young people. The focus on fantasy is in contrast to the more domestic real life orientated stories of, for example,

Jacqueline Wilson, where adults likewise move from centre stage but are still present, often representing the failures of adults to 'do their job properly'. Young people noted the role of parents and members of the extended family. Two girls talking about adults in books by Jacqueline Wilson acknowledged that some adults in her books were 'kind and helpful'. Amy says that:

I think it's quite good that they've got adults as well cos like a mix of adults and children so like ye ken [know] how the adults feel and children...

(Amy aged 13 years)

They also highlighted that some of the parents did not cope, 'moany mums' as Holly (aged 13 years) described this phenomenon, giving the example of the book *The Illustrated Mum* by Jacqueline Wilson (1999). Another girl said that she was not 'too fussy' about the ways that adults were portrayed and that:

parents aren't in it [the book] as much as the kids and don't have as much as part of the book.

(Stephanie aged 13 years)

Parents and carers are usually the most important adults in young people's lives. In many texts for children and young people, this situation is reversed; fictional parents and members of the extended family are removed from the text. Young characters are then depicted as orphaned or, in less extreme situations with missing or absent parents. As Joanna says:

Sometimes like in books, children can be quite poor and can be orphans, and they won't have a Dad and a Mum.

(Joanna aged 10 years)

This orphaned or abandoned state is a narrative device which removes the potential restrictions that an adult, albeit a fictional character can bring. This brings a number of benefits to the text. Without adults, young people can be autonomous and embark on challenges that would otherwise appear unrealistic. As Mayall suggests, the use of adult absence in children's fiction gives:

power of independent action to children in contradistinction to much of ordinary life where they are subject to adult authority.

(Mayall, 2002: 30)

The boundaries of young people's opportunities can extend beyond those that would be appropriate for non-fictional children. As Paul states:

Like main characters that dae [do] stuff that ye'll [you will] remember are orphans. I dinnae ken why but it's just...I think it's quite daft in a way.

(Paul aged 13 years)

Paul recognised that being an orphan is fictionally empowering. The lack of the significant presence of adults is acknowledged as a device but several young people agreed that it gave permission for child characters to do more than they would usually be allowed to do. When asked if he thought that the presence of adults would stop Harry Potter and Alex Rider from doing things, Paul suggested that:

Like that's what's good about [about] them being orphans in a way as well...But like when they are orphans they can dae [do] what they want. In Harry Potter, he disnae [does not] listen tae [to] his uncle and that cos his uncle disnae like him. So he does what he wants and he disnae care about what his uncle thinks. Same with Alex Rider. I dinnae really think he cares what anybody thinks like.

(Paul aged 13 years)

Being without parents or close carers liberates some young characters from adult constraints. Use of this narrative device also suggests that this un-parented state is character forming, allowing the development of strategies for emotional and physical survival. It profiles the challenges of young people who have to exist without adult care and support. As Qvortrup says, orphans are 'truly at the margins of society' (2005: 14). Placing young characters in this position offers a counterpoint to majority norms and practices as well as conforming to a fictional archetype of the outsider in narrative. Being an orphan is also threatening to society structurally. This view of orphans has a long history. The author Margaret Attwood (2008) in a newspaper article on the classic children's book, *Anne of Green Gables* (Montgomery, 2006 [1908]), suggests that while, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century novels, orphans were 'heroes in training', outside of the novel

orphans were 'feared and despised as fruits of sin'. In the twenty first century, Ennew suggests that orphans who live outside of the family 'challenge the necessities of patriarchy' and threaten the consensus that family is necessary' (Ennew, 2005: 131). This potential undermining of society's most important institution throws up possibilities for new family forms to be created and represented in fictions, based around friendships with peers and drawing in other supportive adults as friends and as mentors. These characters can be caring in a way that parents are not. Lyra, in Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (2001) trilogy, finds her care, for example, not through her parents but through others such as the warrior bear, Iorek Byrnison or her peer, Will.

Young people were aware of the ways in which adults were positioned in books and acknowledged the narrative devices that removed them from the focus of the text. Adult characters were perceived to have a less powerful role than would be usual in everyday non fictional childhoods. This displacement enables authors to place young people in the leading roles. Significant adults who would usually be involved in caring roles for children and young people are often sidelined or erased. These caring adults are often replaced with different kinds of relationships which provide an opportunity to redraw boundaries of fictional childhood. The transitional changes of childhood, in many books, are based on adventures, trials and feats of endurance rather than the more usual boundaries of adult age designated regulation. These alternative fictional perspectives of childhood can depict the possibility of different kinds of support as well as affirming the importance and virtue of friendship. The process of 'becoming' an adult, as opposed to 'becoming' a person, is then closely enmeshed with a depiction of children's agency. Young people's 'becoming' is part of their social agency rather than something separate and detached.

Chapter 8 Happy endings: young people constructing childhood

Children want adults to give them clear, comprehensible, but not childlike books. Least of all do they want what adults think of as childlike. Children are perfectly able to appreciate serious matters, even when these may seem remote and indigestible, so long as they are sincere and come straight from the heart.

(Benjamin, 1996: 406 [1924])

I think of children's books as not so much for children, but as the filling that goes between the child world and the adult world. One way or another, all children's books have to negotiate that space whether it's thinking about how the text of a picture book will sound when read aloud, or how the child views him or herself in a world run by adults.

(Rosen, 2008b)

Introduction

At the beginning of this thesis, I asked whether books provided a space for children and young people in an adult constructed world. My intention was to reflect on the extent to which young people are passive recipients of representations in books or if young people actively worked with texts to contribute to the shaping of themselves. I wanted to find out how constructs of childhood influenced young people's engagement with books. Underpinning the study was a commitment to the participation of young people in the research as well as an adherence to sociological theories about childhood and young people's position as social actors.

I explored these themes by asking young people about the representations of childhood that they encountered in books. Four specific areas were considered; young people's reading interests and how these impacted on their engagement with books, young people's reflections on the relationship between books and real life, whether depictions of fictional young people provided alternative representations of childhood, and if young people were the passive recipients or the active co-

constructors of the positions presented to them with reference to gender and the presence of adults. I drew attention to the influence of different constructs of childhood, drawing on the oppositional constructs that are often used; *becoming*, children and young people as adults-in-waiting and *being*, children and young people as social agents. These constructs provided a framework for the study.

This final chapter brings together the findings from the earlier chapters, reviewing the main areas that have emerged. The findings are structured by three themes that emerged during the study. The first section, *In and around the book*, considers the influences on young people's engagement with books. The second, *Space for young people*, examines whether young people thought that books provided them with representations of childhood that they found credible. The third, *Understanding the other*, considers the presence of the 'other' in books across gender and generation. Finally, I draw together the arguments and identify gaps in research which might offer fruitful investigation for the future.

In and around the book

Throughout this thesis, I have emphasised that exploring young people's engagement with books is far more than an encounter between an individual reader and a book. Focusing solely on young people's views of particular books does not reveal the complexity of their interactions with texts. In order to explore this further, I sought to find out more about young people's reading interests and habits by asking the question 'are constructs of childhood embedded in young people's reading experiences'?

As I have highlighted throughout the study, the importance that adults attach to the act of reading by young people and the importance of fiction as a tool to support learning means that the act of reading is constructed in various ways. Reading is caught between the pedagogical imperatives of education where literacy is prioritised, parental support of these ambitions and young people's own choices which may or may not be in accord with both. Ensuring that children and young people read is part of an adult desire for the younger generation to acquire skills to deal with the transition into adulthood and the social and economic obligations that this entails (Cook-Gumperz, 2006a; Holden, 2004). Children and young people's

position as readers is therefore closely aligned with adult constructions of children as human becomings. If young people are not reading, they are not complying with an adult expectation for childhood; children are *supposed* to learn to read and actively engage with books as readers.

This expectation has many implications for young people's relationships with the texts they read. On the one hand, culture for children and young people has to appeal to them and accommodate their interests; its consumption is limited and compromised if young people do not like the texts they encounter. On the other hand, young people's engagement with books can still be constrained by the boundaries of what is acceptable to adults. It is caught between an understanding of children as developmentally immature human becomings and their right to be autonomous beings, actively making choices about how, when and what they read. The presence of these two discourses reflects a pattern which is embedded in childhood experiences (Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup, 2005). It also emphasises some of the themes that emerged in this study, highlighting that young people's relationships with books are never neutral encounters. They are highly influenced by constructions of childhood as well as by the identities that young people bring to texts.

The research found that young people had diverse experiences as readers. Many young people enjoyed reading. Some read because it was expected of them while others found reading a difficult task or did not like reading at all. Most young people enjoyed reading stories. Many young people therefore had a commitment to reading and to reading fiction in line with adult preferences. Their reading habits were also influenced by age and gender with older young people reading less and this particularly being the case for older boys. This, in turn, suggests that reading can become a contested space between adults who want young people to read and young people who do not, either because they simply do not want to, or because other influences are brought to bear on this activity.

The study's focus on age and gender on young people's engagement with texts should not be seen to diminish the importance of the influence of other factors on readers such as their socio-economic status, their access to education, race and disability (Barton and Hamilton, 2000; Clark and Foster, 2005; Hilton, 1996; Kress,

2003a; Marsh and Millard, 2000; Watson, 1992a). Children who have access to free school meals, for example, are more likely to have a negative view of reading and view themselves as less skilled readers (Clark and Foster, 2005). The Scottish Growing Up in Scotland study (Scottish Government, 2008) found that these inequalities begin at an early age with very young children having less access to books if they are from lone parent families and if their mothers have fewer educational qualifications. Children and young people do not have equal access to cultural resources (Buckingham, 2008; Hilton, 1996). Their construction as readers is dependent on many factors which require exploration in depth through other research.

The study also found that the diversity of young people's reading habits extended to their reading interests. Young people proactively made decisions about their reading preferences. Some of the texts that young people liked, such as traditional novels, are seen as high status by adults while others, such as comics and magazines, the most popular choice of reading matter for young people in this study, are often regarded as low in literary value (Barker, 1989; Hopper, 2005; Kline, 1993; Marsh and Millard, 2000). Young people were therefore likely to be reading both with, and against, adults' preferences of what they should read. If adults then give high priority to fictional novels at the exclusion of other kinds of texts, they are ignoring a range of young people's reading interests. This suggests that an alternative and more encompassing view of young people's literacy is required both in and out of school. Taking this wider perspective would enable young people's interests and skills to be more widely recognised by adults, acknowledging young people's textual agency.

The study found that young people had a sophisticated understanding of the different elements of books. They knew about genres, narrative techniques and characterisation. Even where young people were not keen readers, their knowledge of authors, and their books and the products that go alongside them, was considerable. They made critical judgements about which books best suited their imaginative, social and cultural needs. Children and young people displayed that they were, as far as this research could assess, adroit text handlers. This competency and agency is confirmed by the work of others across different media (Buckingham, 2000; Mackey, 2007; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002). Many young people

demonstrated in interview discussions that they could analyse the relative value of texts. This suggests that they have the ‘critical literacy’ which Drotner and Livingstone (2008) state is required in a media orientated world. Buckingham (2000), however, argues that adults should not, in their haste to acknowledge children’s agency, overestimate children’s capacities and the influence of marketing. This does not mean that young people were unable to make their own critical assessments of books but the study showed that they were significantly influenced by the ways that adult producers presented texts. Young people can have agency at the same time as developing their skills and competencies (Buckingham, 2000; Kinder, 1999; Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002; Qvortrup, 2005). These two understandings should be seen as complementary rather than as oppositional constructions.

Books and fictional texts in particular, are seen to be less contested than other forms of media for children because of their prized social and educational purposes (Buckingham, 2003). But young people are living in a culturally diverse environment with many textual opportunities available to them (Bearne, 2003a). In this study I found that young people’s bedrooms were media rich personal spaces where children’s books sat alongside televisions, DVD players, computers and game technologies as well as more traditional toys and other belongings. Access to these products is, however, unequal. This and other studies show that young people do not have the same resources at home (Livingstone, 2002). Figures from the UK Social Trends Survey (Office for National Statistics, 2007b) indicate that 40 per cent of children aged 8 to 11 years and 71 per cent of 12 to 15 year olds had use of the internet at home, showing that there are homes where young people do not have the same technological access as others. Socio-economic status continues to make a difference in young people’s access to digital media (Livingstone and Bober, 2005). This study also found that there was an uneven gendered distribution of media and electronic products. Boys had more access to these items in their bedrooms than girls.

The range of activities in which young people in this research were engaged in and out of the home indicates that books were only one of many leisure opportunities open to them. However, as others point out, this image of media engaged young people also unsettles adults. There is suspicion of the new technologies available to

children and young people (Drotner and Livingstone, 2008; Kinder, 1999; Livingstone, 2002; Prout, 2005) as well as concern that the primacy of reading is being unseated by other media attractions (Benton, 1995b). Young people, however, did not view books as detached from other cultural forms. In the interviews, they demonstrated a knowledge which extended across media, drawing on intertextual influences in their discussions about books; television programmes and films all contributed to their understanding of narrative. This is confirmed by the research of Mackey (2007) who found that young people moved easily between textual worlds and that it is an exception if a child uses only one medium to the exclusion of others. This richness of options is not necessarily reflected in the school environment, resulting potentially in a gap between the literacies that are available at home and those that are favoured in school (Coles and Hall, 2002; Grainger, 2004). The considerable expertise that I found that young people showed they possessed can be unacknowledged in school led approaches to reading as school texts tend to focus on traditional fiction (Marsh and Millard, 2000; Coles and Hall, 2002). So the interest young people indicated that they had in comics, magazines and factual books, for example, would not usually be reflected in the choice of classroom texts.

The study's findings that young people were interested in texts across media reflects changes in literacies that have occurred during the last few years and which have been emphasised by other researchers (Bearne, 2003a; Benton, 1995b; Drotner, 2005; Kress, 2003a; Marsh and Millard, 2000). They variously point out that most cultural texts are produced for young people who are also increasingly engaged as consumers, readers and sometimes even producers in areas where many adults feel unskilled. These new media also offer opportunities for creative participation for young people (de Block and Buckingham, 2007). But, in contrast, many adults hang onto their 'conventional readerly ways' in the face of new digital literacies (Marsh and Millard, 2000:5). Literacy practices are fluid but adult assessments of children's literacy are not so encompassing. This indicates that there can be a dissonance between adults' and young people's views of what texts are valuable. This was not explored in this study and would merit further research on adults' views on what young people read.

As I have suggested throughout this thesis, constructions of childhood influence perspectives on young people's reading experiences. The importance attached to books as an educational tool can limit adults' construction of childhood in relation to reading, focusing on children as educational and social human becomings. Other kinds of texts, on the other hand, extend the menu of texts from which young people can choose and in areas where adults may not be expert. Returning to the research question 'are different constructs of childhood embedded in young people's reading experiences?', my findings show that young people engaged with texts in ways which can move beyond traditional understandings of literacy but where young people's agency might not be associated with the prized act of reading. In addition, young people's reading interests and choices varied by age, gender and individual preferences. These may or may not be in accord with adult perspectives. However, in spite of the availability of other texts and new literacies, the research found that the fictional novel remains a dominant literary form for storytelling and that young people valued its contribution. Young people in this study had rich textual identities across different media with many influences on their reading interests. Their construction as readers and young people was therefore complex and influenced by, as well as influencing, our understandings of childhood.

Space for young people

In the opening chapter, I described my research interest in how children create, find and take possession of their own space in an adult constructed world. The term 'space' is used in this study as a measure of young people's capacity to have autonomy, power and self determination in the places of childhood. This is not an uncommon way of describing how young people's agency is manifested. Watson writing about children's books states that:

'Space' does not imply any kind of coercion. A space is where something might happen, that is all. Children might talk about their reading, and adults might listen. To think of children's books as a cultural space is a way of reminding ourselves that, though 'childhood' is undoubtedly an adult concept with a complex social history, there are no agreed versions of childhood which are simply imposed upon acquiescent children.

Watson (1992a:7)

The spaces of childhood are something apart from the adult world, implying less governed environments which are more child and young person centred. It suggests that young people have agency and the ability to construct their own understandings of childhood. Taking this spatial analogy further, children's books can also be described as spaces which are designated for young people by adults (James et al, 1998). Children and young people are supposed to inhabit the spaces of children's books and these spaces are bounded by adults.

Neither adult designated and controlled spaces nor the autonomous, child led spaces of childhood are adequate interpretations of the relationship between young people and books. The multiple ambitions, roles and participants involved in children's books suggest otherwise. Instead, these spaces are shared by children and young people with adults who are the producers and mediators of books. There is a mutual dependency that derives from this relationship. Children's books cannot exist without children and young people. In their current format, they also cannot exist without adults. Moss and Petrie recognise this subtle generational interaction, asserting the importance of spaces in children's services:

...where children are understood as fellow citizens with rights, participating members of the social groups in which they find themselves, agents of their own lives but also interdependent with others, co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, children who co-exist with others in society on the basis of who they are, rather than who they will become.

(Moss and Petrie, 2002:106)

Moss and Petrie (2002) suggest that space is shared as are the meanings that are derived from it. This is in accord with the research findings. The study found that many young people in the study indicated that they valued the social and imaginative spaces of texts. Young people's responses also reflected their understanding of the complexity of other interventions in the books they read. They drew intertextually on other media and narratives and acknowledged the presence of adults in the texts. They were aware of the context in which they accessed books and the influences that impacted on their reading interests. This suggests that they were active co-constructors of texts, jointly finding meaning in partnership with adult producers.

They did not have the autonomy to be independent constructors but neither were they passive recipients of texts. Their textual space was shared.

Although the concept of 'space' is frequently used to describe the experience of both governed and autonomous childhoods, it is also an amorphous and difficult-to-measure term. When a 'space' exists and when it does not, is subjective, defined by adults rather than by children. It suggests the absence of linguistic and analytical tools to fully interpret constructions of childhood. As Jenkins suggests, adults lack a 'political vocabulary for when children buck adult demands' (1998: 31). We are reduced to understanding childhood through terms which suggest binary opposites (Kinder, 1999) or are, in some way, indefinable. There is an indeterminate 'fuzziness' to adult attempts to analyse constructions of childhood. This is a challenge which was present in this study; how could I find out what constituted the spaces of childhood and relate this to young people's views on the representation of childhood in children's books?

Asking young people about their reflections on the relationship between 'real life' and books was one way of examining whether books represented childhood and other aspects of human experience in ways which resonated with young people. As I suggest in Chapter 5, this was a problematic question for a number of reasons. Children's books do not reflect a full spectrum of experiences and therefore cannot fully represent childhood in its all diversity and complexity. Books, like other cultural representations, can elide over aspects of childhood which are seen by adults as uninteresting or are perceived to be more controversial (Hollindale, 1997; Hunt, 2005). The connections between books and 'real life' are therefore limited in scope, caught between adults' constructions of childhood and young people's own life worlds. This does not mean that children's books fail to depict an imaginative version of reality within a text. This study found that many books provided representations which young people found acceptable in a narrative form. By asking a question about young people's reflections on 'real life' in books, I did not presume that books were a textual mirror image of childhoods but they had to have both meaning and credibility for young people. As Bruner points out 'it is the sense of things often derived from narrative that makes later real-life reference possible' (2003: 8).

The study found that young people were able to identify elements in books that they thought were realistic, akin in some way to their knowledge and experience as well as their understanding of narrative styles and genres. Young people identified events or situations that they thought were credible but which they indicated that they had not experienced themselves. The 'real life' nature of texts did not have to depict young people's own lifeworlds. It could have elements which were recognisable as representations of childhood. Some participants stated that reading about such situations helped young people to respond to them more effectively, providing a learning experience about dealing with difficult areas of childhood and adulthood, a role that adults often attribute to children's books. Some young people were more sceptical of whether books were good at describing childhood, highlighting instances where authors had been less successful. Young people were therefore not a homogenous group in their responses to texts. They brought different interests and experiences to bear on their reading which meant that books which were acclaimed by some for their realistic qualities were not similarly regarded by other young people. Books provided fictional spaces which young people enjoyed but which could also be flawed or partial depending on the text and the young person.

I also sought to find out what young people thought about the representations of child characters in books. This was based on a view that children and young people are not powerful in contemporary society, a position which is often reversed in books for children where young characters have central roles with power and autonomy (Cunningham, 2006; Hilton, 1996; Nikolajeva, 2003). There is therefore a fictional opportunity for young people to access a space which is less bounded and governed than that of the everyday. However, understandings of childhood also influence the way that child characters are portrayed (Avery, 1983). Authors create fictional children and young people in keeping with contemporary perspectives. Sometimes these representations are indicative of majority views of childhood while others reflect emergent or minority positions. Generally, however, children's books are biased towards empowering young characters and therefore provide a fictional place where young people's agency is acknowledged.

The research found that young people identified child characters that they enjoyed who had a mixture of heroic and special qualities. They also liked characters with

more everyday attributes which they recognised as being in tune with their own experiences and preferences. However, some young people felt that authors sometimes misjudged young people, underestimating what they are capable of doing in both fictional and everyday settings. Young people discussed competent and independent child characters. They wanted to read about upbeat, positive depictions of young people's lives while recognising and enjoying the fictional devices of plot, description and characterisation. Their views did not reflect an interest in fictional children as human beings but as persons in their own right.

Returning to the research questions, 'what are young people's reflections on the relationships between books and 'real life' and 'do the depictions of child characters provide alternative representations of childhood that are not dominant in society?', the study found that many young people were able to identify components of books that were credible or which were in accord with their imaginative interests. Books provided an interpretation of 'real life' that resonated with young people. Participants liked assertive representations of childhood with fictional characters having power and special qualities. They also enjoyed reading about everyday positive portrayals of young people who dealt with the complexities of being human. Young readers saw the skills demonstrated within fictional portrayals as within the range of competences that they believed young people to have. However, young people also identified that there were limitations to some texts because of the ways in which fictional childhoods were depicted and assumptions that were made by adult producers about young people's interests as readers. These limitations included an underestimation by adults of the skills of young people with a resulting censoring of the activities of young characters.

Understanding the other

In order to consider whether young people are the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them, I explored young people's gendered relationships with books and what young people thought about adults' presence and role in and around texts. Placing generational age and gender together is not by chance. The experiences of both are central to our notions of self as well as our experience of 'other'. In childhood, these two states of being influence young people's daily experiences as well as their transition to older childhood and

adulthood. Mayall (2002) highlights the importance of these different identities, emphasising that gender and generation are fundamental to the positioning of childhood. Being a boy or girl or being a particular age affects how young people view the world but it also impacts on how others construct children and young people's identities.

Suggesting that young people are passive recipients of children's books implies that they accept the representations that are passed to them without question. They do not seek, find or construct their own meanings in texts. It also suggests that young people's reactions make no difference to a book; it is enough that they read what they are given. This appears to denude children's books of any meaning for their readers and adult producers. But, as highlighted previously, readers are actively engaged in making meaning from texts (Bearne, 2003a; Benton, 2005; Hourihan, 1997). At its simplest, this means that young people make choices about what they read and decide what they like. More profoundly, they analyse the effectiveness of the ways in which books represent particular experiences. Young people bring their own understandings and experience to bear on their response to children's books; they construct their own readings. However, readers do not do this by themselves. They are presented with texts which have been produced by others. They are, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, co-constructors who find their own meaning in tandem with other co-constructors, adult authors, producers and mediators of texts. These relationships are further influenced by meaning drawn from other experiences such as family, school and the media. As Prout points out:

Generational relations and life courses are constructed through their partial dependence and connection with a multitude of entities.

(Prout, 2005: 114)

This complicated interaction applied to young people's gendered engagement with books. In Chapter 7, I drew attention to the influence of school, educational achievement and literacy practices on young people's gendered relationships with books and reading. These influences have been manifested in concern about boys' performance in school (Frosh et al, 2002; Twist et al, 2007; Younger et al, 2005) as well as in the dominance of traditional fiction as an educational tool which appeals to girls more than boys (Coles and Hall, 2002, Millard, 1997).

The study found that what young people chose to read was often gendered although there was an overlap in the kind of books that young people liked regardless of whether they were boys or girls. Girls had more interest in realistic fictions while boys sought stories with a focus on action and suspense as well as factual texts on sports. Some young people, including boys, read across the gender divide. Many boys had a preference for young male characters, dismissing girls as less active or adventurous. Girls, on the other hand, were more accepting of male characters while also enjoying texts that were more obviously for young female readers. Young people's reading identities and interests were gendered although the extent of this was also fluid; young people did not take up gendered positions consistently. This is in accord with other research which finds that children and young people's gendered identity is more relevant in some situations than others (James, 2005; Marsh and Millard, 2000; Thorne, 1993; Younger et al, 2005).

Adults have a number of different roles in relation to books and bring an accumulated knowledge of children and childhood to their contributions to texts. Their relationship to childhood is based on their own memories and experiences as well as their perceptions of the modern world (Buckingham, 2000; Jenks, 2005; Jones, 2003; Philo, 2003; Treacher, 2000). Although there has been a separation of childhood from adulthood in contemporary society (Mayall, 2002; Prout, 2005), I found that this separation was not consistently demonstrated in young people's views on adults in and around children's books. Taking Jenkins' (1998) perspective that children and young people's culture is still, on the whole, in the hands of adults as creators, producers and mediators, young people in this study were unperturbed by the presence of adult authors in the texts they read. They were aware of, and interested in the authors behind the texts, their narrative styles and their biographical details. They did not expect adults to be absent.

I do not suggest that this means that there is always a generational alliance or interaction between young people and adults. Mayall's research found that children form 'solidarity groups' in order to undermine adult power in school and in other settings (202: 161). In this study, some authors were regarded as less successful in representing young people, based on readers' individual perceptions and preferences. Young people also noted that adult characters were not generally centre stage in

books, displaced by the more prominent roles of young characters. They recognised that children's books often positioned fictional adults differently to fictional children and young people. This was particularly the case in the representation of parenting or caring roles in books and is in marked contrast to most adult child relations in the everyday. Books sometimes provide, therefore, another interpretation of generational exchange. These relationships can be mutually positive rather than based on conflict between adults and young people

In books for young people, although there is a gap of experience and age between the adult author and the younger reader, there is, to some extent, a shared meeting point in a text. This should not be simplistically interpreted. Interaction between adulthood and childhood is, of course, fundamental to society's well being but it also reflects a power dynamic that underpins all constructs of childhood. There is a temptation to be disingenuous about this relationship, implying that the author and reader meet in the neutral territory of the fictional book. However, this ignores the roles of the powerful adult author and other producers behind the text.

In answer to the question of whether young people were the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them with reference to gender and the presence of adults, I found that young people did actively engage with the texts they read, providing their own perspectives on the place of gender and the role of adults in and out of texts. This suggests, in line with my earlier findings, that accepting young people as co-constructors of texts is valid. However, this interpretation of the findings is not unproblematic. The term 'co-constructors', however, also implies an equality of power and influence between the different contributors to a text. So the extent to which young people are co-constructors is more difficult to assess on the basis of the evidence of the study without scrutiny of adults' roles and motivations in their production of texts. This suggests that further research should be undertaken with adults to explore their engagement with texts for children and young people, drawing on intergenerational studies. The relationships between constructors of texts, young people and adults, are complex and cannot be dissociated from an established model of adult child relations.

Reflecting on the study

The question at the centre of the thesis has been, at times, elusive. How has it been possible to explore young people's views on representations of childhood in books? It is difficult, after all, to find out what happens in the encounter between the reader and texts, just as it is hard to 'fix' on the meanings that are attributed to childhood. It has been important to engage with the 'vagueness' and lack of specificity that lies at the heart of these different interrogations and seek a better understanding of them both. There are, therefore, several layers of complexity to the study which are also relevant in considering the validity and generalisability of the study's findings.

Firstly, as repeated frequently in this thesis, childhood is an uncertain and fluid social construct (James and Prout, 1997; Jenks, 2005; Mayall, 2002). It encompasses a considerable range of domains and experiences (Bradshaw and Mayhew, 2005); from young people's education to their play and leisure, from the relationships within the family to those in public settings, from the development of self to the place of young people as citizens and from access to global media to cultural products for children. It is influenced by children and young people's age, gender, race, socio economic status, family circumstances and their geographical location. Finding a way to explore childhood is therefore challenging by virtue of the subject's potential size and scope. In order to make this task manageable, I decided to focus on a particular age group, young people aged 10 to 14 years, and to take gender into account as a factor which impacts on young people's encounters with books rather than attempt to explore the full range of influences on childhood. This was based on the importance that these areas have in relation to children and young people's reading experience. However, I acknowledge that the study would have benefited from widening the scope of the research and considering the impact of other areas on young people.

I concentrated on particular aspects of the representation of childhood in children's books, taking a snapshot from a much wider landscape. The areas I explored were based around the relationships that young people have with the books they read and the fictional devices that are used in books to attract readers' interest. Some of those areas were conceptually difficult such as what was 'real' in books and whether books provided alternative depictions of childhood through the portrayals of child characters. This was discussed in earlier chapters with Bruner (1986), for example,

suggesting that character is a literary notion which is difficult to capture while Berger and Luckmann (1967) state that what is 'real' is socially constructed and difficult to define (see Chapters 5 and 6). Young people responded with insight and thoughtfulness to these questions. This is not an unusual experience for researchers of childhood and for those exploring young people's culture. Mackey (2007), for example, found that young people were highly engaged in their participation in her study on media literacies. This is also my experience as a researcher; young people participate generously in adult research. This can be explained as courteousness as well as a matter-of-course acceptance by young people of generational power imbalances; they agree, in many instances, to adult requests. This might be partly due to the subject for study which appeared to be of interest to the participants. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh point out in their discussion of researching children's popular culture:

children possess an expertise about their own popular culture that is theirs by virtue of their being the intended audience and/or customer, but is also theirs by their willing and sometimes passionate engagement with the show, book or toy.

(Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002:9)

A considerable proportion of research about and including children focuses on their vulnerability because of age and the failures of services, home or institutional environments to meet their needs. There is a need, however, for this important and necessary research to be balanced by other insights into childhood, allowing for young people to reflect on their own experience and interests in different ways. This complementary research provides an opportunity for a rebalancing of understandings of childhood, moving away from a dominant focus on the problems and deficits of being young as interpreted by adults.

Another challenge lay in the data analysis. As highlighted in Chapter 3, the data did not always lend itself to being attributed to discrete areas or particular questions. An interview discussion about what was real in books was also relevant to an understanding of gender and the depiction of characters. This created some artificial boundaries in the way that the findings have been presented in the previous chapters as well as showing that themes are often difficult to categorise. The meaning that is derived from participants' accounts is often fragmented and cannot always be easily

controlled by the researcher (Riessman, 2002). Although I am satisfied with the research rewards that the study's findings have provided, I would, on reflection, have extended the scope of some areas so that they could have been considered in greater depth. I could have looked at, for example, the depiction of relationships by investigating young people's views on family formation in books and relating this to their own experience. The research could have been refocused on young people's views on the place of adults in and around books in order to explore generational interaction in the production and construction of texts in a more profound way. These would have resulted in more detailed insights but, on the other hand, there would have been less consideration of my original wider research focus on representations of childhood.

It is also not easy to understand what happens in the process of readers engaging with texts and how we make meaning from those encounters (Benton, 2005; Bruner, 1986; Hunt, 2005). Hilton says that it is complicated to disentangle the place of culture in contributing to our sense of self, suggesting that books on culture (and therefore research studies such as this) address themselves to 'areas of our lives where we have a limited understanding, where there are gaps and silences' (1996:1). Talking about books is not always easy due to other practical constraints. Young people generally discussed books that they had read recently, suggesting that it is more difficult to recall the details of books read some time previously. This meant that a narrow range of texts was often discussed which did not necessarily reflect the breadth of young people's reading interests. This was partly a methodological issue. It suggests that other approaches could be used to gather young people's views on books over a period of time in order to capture a greater richness of reading interests. On the other hand, there is a danger in making a research encounter about books and reading too scholarly and pedagogical in its structure so that it appears to be allied with educational activity rather than an attempt to learn more about young people's life worlds. This was not the intention of the research which aimed to be young person centred in its approaches.

Working across disciplines to explore childhood creates a challenge in ensuring that all relevant theoretical and research experience is utilised. Prout (2005) emphasises that he is not in a position to be an expert at everything relating to childhood due to

the interdisciplinary nature of childhood studies. Drotner and Livingstone (2008) remark that they have found that there are challenges in finding a theoretical and disciplinary space for their work on new media. They suggest that 'following research questions through multiple layers of context can quickly exhaust a researcher's expertise' (Drotner and Livingstone, 2008:6). I was relieved to find echoes of my own perceptions about limitations to the study. The more I explored my findings, the more I found that other academic areas were relevant to my analysis. Coming to the end of the research, I find that there are theories, disciplines and ideas that would have a resonance for this study, but which I was not able to sufficiently explore. I could have, for instance, drawn more extensively on cultural theory. These gaps are partially due to the building of knowledge that happens during the process of investigation; a researcher identifies the need to find out more during the research rather than having a neat pile of theories and ideas ready to use at the outset. It is also, as Prout (2005) suggests, because of the diverse academic resources that are needed to explore childhood.

Having completed the study, there are several areas which merit further investigation. My findings show, as discussed previously, that there is a gendered context to young people's engagement with books. I also believe, in line with Thorne's (1993) work, that this gendering is not always an overt part of young people's identities. It is partly a result of the gendered orientation of adult construction of institutions such as school and through aspects of children's books such as their presentation, subject matter and characterisation. This is backed up by research which shows that reading and the use of fiction in the school environment can privilege a female perspective (Clark and Akerman, 2008; Coles and Hall, 2002; Marsh and Millard, 2000; Millard, 1997). There is therefore a complex range of influences which impact on young people's gender identities and their response to books.

This aspect of the study could be extended by more in depth research into gender and young people's views on books and other forms of culture. It would be beneficial to include a wider range of texts to include the totality of young people's reading interests rather than being limited to traditional fiction. It would also add to existing research on literacy and gender studies, providing useful insights for educational

policy and contributing to current debate on young people's engagement with books and other cultural products. This research would be productive for a number of disciplinary areas including childhood studies where there are gaps in research on gender and children's social agency and in ethnicity, class, religion and geographical location (Morrow, 2006). At different points during the study I have acknowledged the importance of a range of factors on young people's engagement with books. Some of these can be attributed to young people's individual experience while others are influenced by young people's age, gender, educational abilities, socio-economic status, race or disability. Future research could extend the focus of this research on age and gender to include an exploration of these other factors.

The representations of challenging and contested experiences of childhood such as sexual relationships, violence and discrimination could also be explored as part of future study. This was not the focus of the research questions although a small number of young people who participated in the research spoke of books which did not describe young people's experiences well, implying that books provided a censored depiction of childhood (see Chapters 5 and 6). A lack of substantial contributions about this subject might reflect a habitual practice of young people not speaking about these areas to adults unless the topics were actively raised and in a forum where they felt comfortable discussing them. Young people might also have been used to the structures and conventions of written fiction. They might have expected certain childhood experiences to be omitted in books, based on a view that adults censor descriptions of human experience when presenting them to children. Further research could therefore focus on these more contested areas in order to test these assumptions and consider how well books described these experiences. This would also provide insights into adult attitudes which are ambiguous or contradictory in areas of children's culture. There has, for example, been a range of research and commentary on the possible influence of violence in television, films and computer games on children and young people (Buckingham, 2000; Byron, 2008; Kinder, 1999; Kline, 1993; Postman, 1983). Adults want children to read but not to read books which are regarded as being a 'bad' influence or have content of which they disapprove.

The study focused on children's fictional books but the survey and interviews revealed that young people were interested in many different kinds of texts and media. I intend to write more about the research data which I gathered on young people's comparisons between books and television and films. This part of the study was originally a secondary research area, used to prompt discussion about books. It also provided interesting data which would benefit from further analysis. Having completed the study, I believe that more research should be undertaken which focuses on the multi media, multi modal and multi literacy based experiences of children and young people. The diverse and increasingly substantial work of those in the fields of media and children (Buckingham, 2000; Drotner and Livingstone, 2008) and in the fields of literacy (Kress, 2003a; Marsh and Millard, 2000; Mackey, 2007) indicates that there are links to be made between the focus of this research and the work of others. The traditionally arts based approach to children's books, although reflecting a theoretical interrogation of understandings of childhood and their relationship to children's books, rarely includes children and young people's perspectives unless in an educational context. Literary based studies are therefore essential academic investigations which I have found a useful reference point for children's books but they are limited in relationship to understandings of childhood, based sometimes on adult conjecture, rather than on young people's contributions. Children's media studies, on the other hand, have a more social science based approach (Drotner and Livingstone, 2008) which sits more comfortably with the objectives of this study.

I have explored young people's views on representations of childhood. These have provided insights into certain aspects of childhood. However, I have also come to the conclusion that there is a contradiction in asking young people about childhood in children's books without finding out more about adults' views. I have directed my research, correctly, to engage the group of people, children, who are usually 'invisible' as commentators on their own lives. This is only one part of the 'story'. Adults provide interpretations of childhood in books through their roles as authors, parents, publishers, policy makers, media commentators and educationalists. As Mitchell and Reid-Walsh suggest 'the study of children's popular culture has a great deal to say about childhood, and the relationship of adults to childhood' (2002: 2). Adult attitudes about childhood are often emphasised in research with children and

academics such as Alanen and Mayall (2001) have written extensively about child-adult relations. In spite of this, there is not a substantial body of research from a childhood studies perspective which considers what adults think about constructions of childhood.

There are two particular aspects of adult relationships to books and other cultural forms which could be investigated. The first is the place of children's books in the formation of the adult self; how the experiences and memories of childhood shape adults and how this impacts on adults' views about contemporary children's culture. This draws on previous references to the significant role of memory in constructing childhood and to those who have written eloquently on this area (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh, 2002; Philo, 2003; Spufford, 2002; Steedman, 1995; Treacher, 2000). Secondly, I would like to know more about adult views on the connection between social constructions of childhood and how childhood is constructed in books and other cultural products for children. This might offer an opportunity to explore inter-generational understandings of childhood by including both young people and adults in further study.

I would like to reflect on one final methodological element of the study which I referred to briefly in Chapter 3. In future research I would aim to include children and young people in the development of a research project. This is partly because greater participation by children and young people can potentially lead to a more dynamic and co-owned process than a solely adult constructed research project. It acknowledges young people's agency and overtly signals their right to participate (Alderson, 2000). But it is also because much of children's and young people's culture is, in essence, linked to the creative and imaginative spaces of self and childhood. This is a complex area to investigate and would benefit from the insights of young people at an early stage of development. The engagement by children and young people would strengthen a study as well as provide more tangible practical evidence of a theoretical commitment to young people's participation.

Acknowledging Hill's (2006) analysis that it is rare to ask participants about research methods, I would also ensure that there was an evaluation component to any further research. This would enable the reflexive process of research to take participants' views into account.

Conclusion

The title of this thesis, ‘Heroes and Heroines or Just Like Us?’ was intended to set up a juxtaposition to frame the research, asking whether the depiction of childhood in fictional books resembled the experiences of young people. Of course, this statement is rhetorical; books do not replicate young people’s experiences nor are they mirror images of the everyday. It is more that books need, in some way, to be credible and have some resonance with their intended readership if they are to be read, have meaning and be enjoyed. Books also provide alternative representations which do not match our own experiences. They are imaginative spaces which present us with interpretations of the world, suggesting different ways of being. The ‘heroes and heroines’ of the title implies these differences. Even if the heroism of fiction is implausible in relation to our own notions of self, its presentation offers a range of possibilities of the experience of being human and living among others.

This thesis has considered the complex relationship that exists between the adulthood of the producers and mediators of books and a readership of young people. It has explored this dynamic through the perspectives of young people aged 10 to 14 years, focusing on the representations that they encounter in books as well as the ways in which they engage with texts. This is not only a literary or cultural relationship but one which contributes to, is influenced by, and is part of wider understandings of childhood. As described in the opening chapter, childhood is viewed as having many different attributes. It is seen by adults to be a place of anxiety and concern as well as a place of memory and longing (Higgonet, 1998; Jenks, 2005; Philo, 2003; Steedman, 1995). It is regarded as a place of innocence and also as one where children and young people are viewed by adults as unsettling or troublesome (Buckingham, 2000; Hendrick, 2003; James et al, 1998; Stephens, 1995; Wyness, 2000). It is a part of the life course which reflects optimism, based on the contributions that young people can make to the future of families, communities and society (Shamgar-Handelman, 1994). It is viewed as an indicator and barometer of our collective well being (Jenks, 2005). Children’s books, like other representations of childhood, contribute to these multiple understandings.

Concluding this study, my findings can be summarised as the following. The overarching question for the study was ‘what do young people think about the ways

in which children's books represent childhood?' In order to answer this question, I first explored whether different constructs of childhood were embedded in young people's reading experiences. I found that young people brought diverse reading identities and interests to their reading. A significant majority enjoyed reading and reading stories although girls read more than boys and young people read less as they got older. Age and gender were significant factors in young people's reading interests.

Young people were used to operating in media rich environments. Their reading was not detached from their other media interests such as films, television and computer games. This indicates that they had a multi modal approach to engaging with texts. Young people's construction as educational becomings, however, does not always acknowledge the extent of young people's interests, suggesting that young people's skills and knowledge are not fully taken into account in adult led literacy practices. This was also noted in the study. Some young people indicated that they were not always positively influenced by school in their reading activities and acknowledged that certain texts would not be acceptable within the learning constraints of school.

I also explored whether books provided a space which young people found to be relevant and sympathetic to their interests by asking two questions. Firstly, I wanted to know about young people's reflections on the relationship between 'real life' and books. Secondly, I wanted to know if books provided alternative representations of childhood not dominant in society, exploring whether fictional childhoods were presented more positively than is the norm in society.

Many young people appreciated the social and imaginative spaces of texts. They identified realistic elements and depictions of childhood that they found credible and acceptable. Young people liked child characters with a mixture of special and heroic qualities. But some young people also said that adult authors could misjudge them, describing fictional young people in ways which did not resonate with young people's perceptions of fictional or 'real' childhoods.

Participants wanted to read about upbeat positive depictions of young people's lives while enjoying the fictional devices of plot and characterisation. Their interests were aligned to representations of children and young people which showed them as fully

fledged human beings rather than human becomings. Young people were interested in books which were young person centred while recognising that fictional depictions could also be flawed or partial.

Finally I considered whether young people were the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of positions that adults present to them, focusing in particular on young people's gendered relationships with books and what they thought about the presence of adults in and out of books.

What young people read was often gendered although many young people read across the gender divide and gendered positions were not taken up consistently. Girls were more interested in texts that were regarded as realistic while many boys sought stories with a focus on action and sports. Young people were unperturbed by the presence of adults both as fictional characters. They recognised that adults were positioned differently and were aware of, and interested in, adult authors of texts.

The study shows that young people were generally media literate and had wide and sophisticated understandings of the social meanings of texts. Books, however, did not stand alone as objects of media or cultural interest. They co-existed, as a space for imagination, narrative and learning side by side with other media. Young people were not the passive recipients of adult produced texts but were, in many ways, co-constructors of texts. However, how, what and if young people read fictional books was influenced by many factors outside of the texts. Young people had complex relationships with the books they read but their responses to the study's questions revealed an active and thoughtful engagement with fictional books and stories generally. Their perspectives were influenced by, but also had the potential to influence, adults' understandings of childhood.

These findings contribute to knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, the study provides insights into how young people in an age range between 10 and 14 years engaged with books and the influences on their reading. It relates young people's interests to other media. The findings therefore add to, and complement, existing research on literacy and cultural practices in and out of school. Although these findings are generalisable across the UK, they provide unique information which is not currently available in Scotland where the research took place. At the time of

completing the study, the findings on young people's reading activities had been passed to several organisations with an interest in these areas. I intend to continue to disseminate the study's findings to those with a professional and academic focus on young people and literacy.

In addition, the findings also contribute to increasing understandings of how childhood is constructed and represented in different forms across media and cultural products. How childhood is viewed, as I have reiterated throughout the thesis, is often contradictory and is based predominantly on adults' views of children and young people as human becomings although there is also considerable professional and academic interest in children's agency. As the research has been undertaken in a domain which does not have prominence in studies of childhood, this study provides a new perspective on young people's insights into representations of childhood.

It, also, in turn, provides insights into how adult producers depict childhood. It provides a young person centred perspective on how readers engage with fiction for children and young people in contrast to a literary and therefore adult based critique. Finally, the study's focus on age and gender contributes to understandings of the influence of these factors on young people's engagement with books and other media. This is of relevance to those across a number of disciplines with an interest in childhood and gender studies.

In conclusion, I aimed to find out if books provided a space for children and young people. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the use of this term can imply that young people occupy this space by themselves. It suggests an oppositional position; young people have access to their own space or they do not. One conclusion which could be drawn from the findings of the study is that books do provide a cultural and social space for young people. This, however, is a simplistic analysis. Buckingham's (2000) view is that there is a tendency for those who undertake research with children to romanticise young people's views and to see agency where it does not exist or is limited. Instead of asserting that children and young people have possession of their own space to the exclusion of adult others or the converse, that young people are only tolerated in adult designated cultural spaces, I conclude that young people do not 'own' or occupy space by themselves. It is shared with adults in different ways and at different times depending on the setting, the text and the young person.

Children's books are primarily for an audience of children and young people but children's fiction is not a separate or separatist form of culture. It is created by adults and consumed by children and young people who make their own meaning from the texts with which they are presented. On the other hand, adults do not simply 'wish' their fictional representations of childhood into being. They draw on their own knowledge of, and assumptions about, childhood. With different degrees of empathy and success, adults make use of their own interpretations of children and young people's experiences and interests when they create texts. In this shared environment, young people can then be co-producers, accessing what Jenkins calls their 'cultural productivity' which provides young people 'with the materials and skills they need to have to critique their place in the world' (1998:31). They have agency but this has to be set alongside the powerful influences that flow from the adult production and mediation of texts. Children's books are inter-generational spaces rather than those which are just for children or regulated just by adults.

At the beginning of the thesis, I stated that I was committed to a view of children and young people as competent narrators of their own lives. This underpinned the methodology as well as the theoretical positioning of the study. The findings show that young people actively engage with books. They are not passive recipients of the texts that are presented to them. This is not surprising for those who start from a premise that young people are social actors who influence our understandings of this part of the life course. Hollindale (1997) suggests that it is uncontentious to suggest that children and young people contribute to constructions of childhood. But it has to be compared with a common viewpoint that children and young people are not competent and are human becomings rather than persons in their own right. Recent examples of debates on children's books and literacy show that this is not an idle assumption. I drew attention in the first chapter to current debates at the time of writing which illustrated tensions about childhood, including those which were related to children's books and the act of reading. Coming to the conclusion of this study, more examples emerge of the ambiguous ways in which childhood and young people's texts are seen by adults. Jacqueline Wilson, the doyenne of 'realistic' books for girls, had a book removed from a supermarket chain after it received a complaint from a parent because the book contained language that was seen to be inappropriate (Flood, 2008). Carol Ann Duffy, a well known poet writing for adults and children,

had a poem removed from an English exam curriculum because it was supposed to glorify knife crime (Curtis, 2008). The censoring actions by the two agencies, a supermarket company and an exam board did not go unchallenged by adults with an interest in children's books and children (see, for example, Rosen, 2008a). The writers had produced the texts on the assumption that children and young people could find their own meaning within the story and poem. These had already been vetted by other adult cultural and educational gatekeepers. This suggests a lack of consistency on the part of adults. Kinder (1999) points out that there is a conflict between different perspectives of childhood and how these manifest themselves in adult commentary on children and young people's culture. On the one hand, children are often seen as passive and require adult interventions to protect them. On the other hand, some adults see children as active players who engage with the process of contemporary societal changes (Kinder, 1999). These positions, Kinder asserts, are fluid, shifting and changing depending on the topic, the child and the medium. The interventions described above remind us that an acceptance of young people's social agency remains uncertain and contested with debate led by adults and not by young people.

The adult led public discourses, dominated by a protective and judgmental perception that children are human becomings, are in contrast to young people's presentation of themselves and their views on books. In this study, young people did not describe themselves as passive or incompetent. The young people who took part in this research were skilled text handlers. They liked reading books which portrayed assertive and competent fictional young people. The participants did not view childhood or the depiction of childhood negatively, accepting it as a state of being rather than one of becoming. They acknowledged the transition phases of childhood, talking about past experiences and future choices. The strong sense of personhood and agency that young people expressed is found in other research (Buckingham, 2000; Cassidy, 2007; Kinder, 1999; Mayall, 2002; Mackey, 2007). By asserting the agency of young people, however, I do not want to present a uniform picture of childhood. Kinder declares that she is suspicious of 'simplistic monolithic readings' by adults of young people's media encounters (1999: 18). I am careful about coming to general conclusions without acknowledging the diversity and nuanced experiences of young people's childhoods. Young people's responses showed that they brought a

wide variety of identities, interests and experiences to their engagement with texts. Some young people, particularly boys, were disengaged from the act of reading and from fictional books and their voices are therefore more muted in the context of the whole study. I acknowledge this. Assumptions cannot be made about the influences that are brought to bear on all young people's encounters with texts without further exploration.

The young people that participated in this study have now moved on; the books and the other texts that they were reading when they took part in the study will have been left behind. Some young people will now be reading adult books, some will be doing most of their reading on-line and others might not be reading fiction at all. Some might have continued to have a passion for particular kinds of texts, stories or authors. They will be older and now have different experiences of and perspectives on, childhood and young adulthood. I have tried to come to conclusions about the representations of childhood in children's books based on a small sample of young people, exploring a microcosm of childhood cultural experiences which may be pertinent to others who are thinking about children, childhood and children's books. But my findings are already limited by the passing of time. As Spufford suggests, 'capturing' childhood is more important to adults rather than children:

The only child who never grows up is the child adults
imagine themselves being. A real child perpetually changes,
has new experiences, has the same experiences in new ways;
constantly moves on; declares that they are a subject in their
own right.

(Spufford, 2002:36)

Children and young people are co-constructors of childhood and of the meaning that is derived from their experiences. But they do this, in ways which are, in the main, invisible, unrecorded and unacknowledged. The role of the researcher, as a 'bit player' in contributing to our collective knowledge, is to help to make visible young people's views. This offers the potential for our understandings of childhood to become shared and for children and young people's contributions to be seen as credible, relevant and important.

Appendix A: Questionnaire

WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT READING

Answer the questions by ticking the boxes that are right for you. There are no right or wrong answers. I will not use your name so no-one else will know what answers you gave. If you want to write more, write in the space where it says 'other things'.

THANK YOU.

My name:

Age:

Boy or Girl:

School:

Number of form:

Date completed:

1. What do you like reading? <i>Tick the ones that you like.</i>	
Books – stories	<input type="checkbox"/>
Books - facts and information	<input type="checkbox"/>
Magazines	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Game books	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stuff on the internet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comic strip books	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poems	<input type="checkbox"/>
Books in another language	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't read	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other things	

2. Do you read magazines or comics? <i>Write in their names.</i>
Magazines
Comics

3. How much do you read?	
Read lots	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read a bit	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't like reading	<input type="checkbox"/>
Find reading difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Why do you read? Tick the right ones for you.	
It is fun and I enjoy it	<input type="checkbox"/>
It helps me find out things	<input type="checkbox"/>
It helps me with school work	<input type="checkbox"/>
It helps me understand other people/things	<input type="checkbox"/>
I read because I have to	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other things	

5. What do you like reading about? Tick your favourites.	
Mystery and adventure	<input type="checkbox"/>
Suspense and horror	<input type="checkbox"/>
Action stories	<input type="checkbox"/>
Survival	<input type="checkbox"/>
Animals and nature	<input type="checkbox"/>
Things to do with real life	<input type="checkbox"/>
War	<input type="checkbox"/>
Romance and love stories	<input type="checkbox"/>
Characters and school stories	<input type="checkbox"/>
People/Places in the past	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fun stuff	<input type="checkbox"/>
Biography (about real people)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Short stories and snappy reads	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other things	

6. What makes you <u>want</u> to read a book?	
<i>Tick the right ones for you</i>	
The cover- the illustrations and design	<input type="checkbox"/>
What's on the back of the book	<input type="checkbox"/>
Someone tells me about it	<input type="checkbox"/>
My friends like it	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have read books by that writer before	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's easy to get hold of that book	<input type="checkbox"/>
I see a film or TV programme about the book	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's for girls (I am a girl)	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's for boys (I am a boy)	<input type="checkbox"/>
I like books about that subject	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am given it to read in school	<input type="checkbox"/>
It looks easy to read	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other things	

7. What <u>puts you off</u> reading a book? <i>Tick the right ones for you.</i>	
The cover- the illustrations and design	<input type="checkbox"/>
What's on the back of the book	<input type="checkbox"/>
Someone tells me it was not very good	<input type="checkbox"/>
My friends don't like it	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't like the writer	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is difficult to get hold of that book	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't know anything about it	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's for girls (I am a boy)	<input type="checkbox"/>
It's for boys (I am a girl)	<input type="checkbox"/>
I don't like what it is about	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am given it to read in school	<input type="checkbox"/>
It looks difficult to read	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other things	

8. Do you talk about what you read? <i>Tick who you talk to.</i>	
With my friends	<input type="checkbox"/>
My parents/carers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>
School book group	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brothers and sisters	<input type="checkbox"/>
With no-one	<input type="checkbox"/>
Someone else	<input type="checkbox"/>
Who is that person?	

9. Do you read when you are <u>not</u> at school?	
Every day	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sometimes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

10. What things do you have in your bedroom (not clothes or furniture)? <i>Tick the ones you have.</i>	
Games (board games, cards)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Equipment for playing music	<input type="checkbox"/>
TV	<input type="checkbox"/>
Toys (that I play with now or when I was younger)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Books	<input type="checkbox"/>
DVD or video player	<input type="checkbox"/>
Magazines and comics	<input type="checkbox"/>
Computer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gameboy/playstation/gamecube	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports equipment	<input type="checkbox"/>
Things to make me look good (makeup, hairgel)	<input type="checkbox"/>
My brother's or sister's stuff	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other things	

11. Where do you get books from? <i>Tick where you get them.</i>	
Buy them in shop myself	<input type="checkbox"/>
Buy them in school bookclub/bookfair	<input type="checkbox"/>
School – class or school library	<input type="checkbox"/>
Parents/carers buy them for me	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friends lend me them	<input type="checkbox"/>
Borrow them from local library	<input type="checkbox"/>
I already have them at home	<input type="checkbox"/>
They are presents	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't have books	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other places	

12. What do you like doing when you are not at school?			
<i>Tick how often you do them.</i>			
	Most days	Sometimes	Never
Seeing my friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching TV	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watching DVDs or videos	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
After school club	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going out near where I live	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trips with my family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Messing about at home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going to the shops	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening to music	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading books	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Playing sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Skateboarding/rollerblading/bike	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
On my computer	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Texting and phoning friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Playing with playstation/gamecube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading comics and magazines	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Going to activity clubs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doing my hobby	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
What club do you go to?			
What is your hobby?			
Other things you do			

Thank you very much for your help

Appendix B: Interview schedule

Questions	Research method
Overarching question What do young people think about the ways in which children's books represent childhood?	
Are different constructs of childhood embedded in young people's reading experiences? What are young people's reading interests and how do they impact on young people's relationships with books? <i>Interview questions/themes for discussion</i> What are you reading now? What is the book/ text about? Tell me about the other things you like reading? What do you like about these books/texts? <i>Prompt:</i> stories, characters, the place they live, what they do, what happens at the end, what books/texts look like, What television programmes and films do you watch?	Questionnaire/Interviews
What are young people's reflections on the relationship between books and 'real life'? What are young people's views about 'real life' in books? <i>Interview questions/themes for discussion</i> Do you think books for young people are realistic when they tell you about young people? Which books do you think are realistic? <i>Prompt:</i> is it like everyday life, is it different, is it the same- in what ways? Is what happens to characters anything like what happens in young people's lives? Do they do the same things as you? Does being a boy or girl make a difference? Does what happens in books help you understand things better? <i>Prompt:</i> families, relationships with adults, friendships, rules-what you can and can't do, adventures, things that they have, interests, difficult things that happen, what ways are they different Which do you think is best at telling you about children's lives: TV,	Interviews

books, films, magazines or comics? Why?	
<p>Do the depictions of child characters provide alternative representations of childhood that are not dominant in society?</p> <p>What do young people think about the ways in which young characters are represented in books?</p> <p><i>Interview questions/themes for discussion</i></p> <p>What characters do you like in books? Why?</p> <p>What are these characters like?</p> <p>What makes these characters special or interesting?</p> <p><i>Prompt:</i> boy, girl, adult, animal, cartoon character, someone with special powers, fantasy being; description- strong, clever, funny, eccentric, special powers, outspoken, friendly, gets out of/into trouble, attractive, cool, leader; characteristics- likes adventures, helping people, getting into messes</p> <p>So what's the difference between a young person in books and being a young person?</p> <p><i>Prompt:</i> fun, hard, easy, difficult, lots work, get to do things you like, have to do things you dislike</p> <p>What adults are around these characters? What are they like?</p>	Interviews
<p>Are young people the passive recipients or the active co-constructors of the positions that adults present to them?</p> <p>Are young people's relationships to books gendered?</p> <p>What do young people think about the presence and roles of adults in books?</p> <p><i>Interview questions/themes for discussion</i></p> <p>Does it make a difference whether it is a boy or girl character?</p> <p>What do you think about the adults in books?</p> <p>(other questions also cover gender and role of adults)</p>	Questionnaire/Interviews

Appendix C: Consent letters to students

Dear *name of class*

My name is Susan. I am doing a research project at the University of Edinburgh. It is to find out what young people think about the books and other things that they read.

I would like your help in telling me what you think about books and the other things that you read including magazines and comics. It does not matter what you read or if you read a lot or not very much as I am very interested in what you have to tell me.

I am going to come to your *book group/class* over the next few weeks. If you would like to take part, I will give you a questionnaire which will ask you about what you like and don't like reading and some of the things you do when you are not at school.

I will ask you if you would like to take part in an interview and tell me more about the books you read when I come to the school next. You can do the questionnaire by itself or do the questionnaire and then take part in the interview.

I won't use your name in anything that I say or write. I will only tell another adult what you have said if you or someone else might not be safe. I will use a tape recorder when I talk to you so I can remember what you said if that is ok with you. You can talk to me by yourself or along with someone else from the group.

When I have finished my project I will write it into a report.

Please ask me any questions that you want.

Thank you very much for all your help.

Susan Elsley

.....
...

Name.....

I would like to take part in your project YES/NO

Signed.....

Date.....

Appendix D: Consent letters to parents/carers

To Parents/Carers

Dear Parent/Carer

Project on what young people read

I am doing a research project at the University of Edinburgh as part of a postgraduate degree. The research is to find out what young people think about books and the other things that they read.

Name of school has kindly given me permission to meet with students to do this. I will be asking students if they would like to fill in a questionnaire and possibly take part in a short interview. I am writing to you as parent/carer to give you information about the project.

When I have finished my project it will be published as a report. I will not use individuals' names in the report. The young people can decide at any point not to take part in any of the activities.

Please sign the form below if you agree that your child can take part in the project and return it to school.

Thank you.

Susan Elsley

.....

.....

PROJECT ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND WHAT THEY READ

I give consent for

(Name of young person).....
to take part in the project.

Name of parent/carer (print).....

Signed.....

Return to Susan Elsley c/o *Name of contact, name of school*

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